You Remind Me of Cigarettes

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You Remind Me of Cigarettes

by Uncomfortable Duck (ScreamingJuiceBox)

Summary

After a fateful night on the roof, Knox starts struggling with feelings for Charlie.

Notes

Title from Cigarettes by Noah Gunderson

Enjoy !

Chapter 1

Charlie was missing. Or at least, not in bed yet. Cameron had come to Knox's door, beating on it loud enough that there was no way Nolan didn't feel the reverberating wood.

Knox already had bedhead from tossing and turning for the past hour, he was not prepared to handle Cameron's hysterics. So he asks the logical question: "why don't you go bother Neil?"

The red-head shakes his head, "I did! Or, I tried to. His roommate said his dad took him home for the weekend." Knox feels something in his chest tighten at the mention of Mr. Perry, the intense energy he gives off never really leaves these halls.

Knox rubs his face. He remembers what Neil told him, where to look for Charlie when he needed a break from the everything about Welton. "He always climbs on the rooftop," Neil once told him, "he gets wasted and smokes. Honestly, I'm surprised he hasn't been caught yet." 'Maybe they don't care about Charlie enough to catch him', went unspoken, but they both felt it in the air.

So now, Knox puts his hand on Cameron's shoulder. "Yeah, I'll help you find him. But you have to quiet down before you wake the whole hall."

The other boy nods and drops his voice to a whisper, "Should I get the others?"

"No need, I think I know where he is. Go to bed, I'll have Charlie there by the time you wake up." Knox has never had to play the comforting role, that was always Neil, but he thinks he does well enough as Cameron nods and heads back to his room.

Walking towards the window in his own room, Knox thinks about how funny it is that Cameron and Charlie got roomed together. The biggest rebel and the biggest fink. Maybe Welton did it on purpose, try to keep Charlie in line.

'Whole lot of good that's doing them', Knox thinks as he starts his climb out of the window. He reaches around until he finds a hole in the bricks he can hold onto to start climbing.

Welton is old, and the bricks show her age, cracks and holes just big

enough to slip your fingers and toes into. He's not quite as strong as Neil or Charlie, but what he lacks in strength he makes up for in determination.

The climb knocks the wind out of him, and his pajamas have a few small fray patches in them from getting stuck on the rough bricks. He has to blink hard a few times once he gets to the top to keep himself from passing out. His lungs hurt from the cold, and he considers climbing back down before the strong scent of cigarettes hits his nose.

A figure is laying flat on the roof and as Knox carefully makes his way over there, he sees Charlie is gripping onto the shingles of the academy, eyes closed tight, like he's trying to keep himself from flying away. A couple of cigarette butts lay next to him, as well as an empty bottle of whiskey that no doubt was taken from Mr. Dalton.

"Charlie?" Knox isn't sure why but his voice comes out so quiet, the way one would approach a scared animal.

Without opening his eyes, Charlie responds, "I'm fine, Neil."

Knox swears he can smell the alcohol off of his friend's breath from here. He sits down next to Charlie and slips the last cigarette sticking out of the other boys pocket into his own hand. He grabs the lighter by Charlie's hand and lights it, taking a quick drag before speaking. "Neil is at home this weekend, I'm your rescue for today."

Charlie's eyes shoot open and he sits up too fast. Knox puts his hand out and steadies his friend before he falls off the roof. "Knoxious! You scared me, man." He's trying to act sober, and while his voice is steady and speech is unslurred, the slight swaying and tired eyes give him away. That, and the overwhelming smell of alcohol.

"Sorry," he takes another drag off of the stolen cigarette. "Cameron is worried about you, let's get you to bed."

"Cameron is worried about being in trouble."

"Aren't you?"

"It's the weekend." As if that's an answer. Charlie takes a long look at Knox's face, and just as Knox is starting to feel the stare is too much, the other boy exclaims. "Hey! That's mine, you dick."

Knox points to the cigarette in his mouth and raises his eyebrows like he's shocked at this news. "This?"

“Yes, that!” He gives Knox a slight shove. “At least give me a hit.”

“Will you come back down with me if I do?” Knox can’t believe he’s bargaining, can’t believe he’s up here at all. Charlie is safe, he knows how to get himself down, Knox’s job is over. But there’s something nice about being up here, just the two of them.

Charlie rolls his eyes, “in a bit, I promise.” Not exactly what Knox was asking, but he forks over the cigarette anyway. He watches the relief spread through Charlie’s face as the smoke enters his lungs. It makes him look softer. When he finishes, he hands the stick back to Knox. It takes like whiskey and saliva. Knox tries not to think about it too hard.

If Charlie isn’t going to leave quite yet, might as well pry. “Why are you up here, anyway?” He’s trying to be nonchalant, keep the worry out of his voice.

Charlie shrugs and pulls his knees to his chest. “The stars are nice, aren’t they?” Again, not really an answer, it’s becoming a pattern. A sort of sadness laces Charlie’s tone.

“They are,” really, they were. The sky was clear and the moonlight illuminated both boys faces nicely. Charlie holds his hand out and Knox passes him the almost done cig.

Charlie takes a pull off of it and holds it. He leans over to Knox and slips the last drag into his fingers. As Knox opens his mouth to say something, anything to break the silence, Charlie speaks. “My dad called.” His smoke surrounds Knox, entering his mouth. It tastes like cigarettes of course, but also the alcohol and something bitter. Something Charlie. Knox is aware how close his friend is to his face.

“I’m spending most of winter break at the Perry’s.” Charlie finishes his thought and it pulls Knox out of whatever world he had started to escape to. Charlie pulls away and sits back down, “some business trip or another. Swears he’ll be home before Christmas.” ‘We’ll see’ hangs in the air.

“I’m sorry,” Knox means it. All of the boys have been in that situation, and it never feels good.

But Charlie just shrugs, “Neil’s mom is a great cook. And it’s better than spending the break at Hellton.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Knox smirks, “or at least I would. If we had any

liquor." He points to the empty bottle.

"I'm sure there's still some in my spit if you want a taste." Charlie says it so casually, and Knox's chest tightens. He considers the implications, the consequences. What if he didn't like it? What if he did? And then Charlie starts cackling. "Calm down, Knoxie, I'm only joking. I'm not that drunk."

Knox finishes the cigarette and puts it out on the roof below them. He is thankful that the shadows hide his blush, but he's averting eye contact just in case.

His father had told him rumors about Charlie. About Charlie and boys. About how Charlie should be ashamed for how he is with boys. And Knox wants to know if they're true.

He clears his throat, "Have you ever?"

"Ever what?"

"You know," Knox is moving his hands as though that helps anything.

Charlie runs a hand through his hair and for some reason this is the moment Knox's brain registers that Charlie is in an undershirt. He must be freezing. "I'm going to be honest, Knox, I have no idea what kind of code you're speaking in."

"Kissed boys." The moment the words spill out of Knox's mouth, he wishes he could shove them back in. But he can't, so he repeats, "Have you ever?"

Charlie groans and buried his face in hands. "I was making a joke, Knox." Not an answer, yet again.

"Right, but have you?" Knox doesn't know why it's so important for him to know. To confirm what his dad said? No, he didn't care too much about what his dad thought. To learn something about his friend? Maybe. To learn something about himself? The voice in him hopes not.

"A couple times," Charlie admits, "why?" His eyes are peering into Knox's soul and the question echos in his head. Why? Why? Why?

For the first time since Knox has known him, Charlie looks anxious. He's fidgeting with the dead cigarette butts on the ground, waiting for Knox's reaction.

“I haven’t.” He’s blunt about it, hoping that if he’s casual Charlie will feel comfortable. “Aren’t you cold?”

Charlie nods, quiet for once. Knox hold his arms open as an invitation and Charlie takes it, letting Knox wrap warm fleece pajamas around him. Charlie’s skin is freezing to the touch and Knox hold him tighter.

“Please don’t tell anyone.” It’s so soft, one would be baffled to know it came from Charlie Dalton. He doesn’t specify between the alcohol, staying at Neil’s, or kissing boys, so Knox silently vows to talk about none of it.

“Don’t worry, Dalton. I won’t say anything.” Charlie looks up at him and his eyes are wet, like he’s on the verge of a breakdown. Knox carefully wipes the almost-tears away, “I mean it, okay? Now come on, let’s get to bed.” Charlie nods and goes to stand up. Knox grabs all of the trash for him, shoving it into his pockets to dispose of later.

As they walk to the spot where they’ll both climb down, Knox is overwhelmed with a feeling of having to know. So, when they reach the spot, he gently grabs Charlie’s arm to get his attention. “I want to.”

Charlie tilts his head, “You have to start saying what you mean because-“

“Kiss a boy, kiss you.” Knox looks at his feet after he says it.

Charlie doesn’t speak, just places his hand on Knox’s jaw to guide Knox’s eyes up to his. It feels like an eternity of staring before Charlie leans in and their lips connect. It’s short, but Knox can taste whiskey and smoke and bitter and Charlie.

When they pull away, Charlie is smirking. “That all?” Knox nods. “Good, let’s go to bed before Cameron decides to fink.”

’That’s what I’ve been saying’, Knox thinks, but Charlie is already out of sight, climbing down the building and back to his room.

Knox puts his hand to his lips, savoring in the feeling for just a moment. He knows he can never do that again, knows that if anybody found out Charlie and him would both be in danger. So he makes a vow to never speak about it, not even to Charlie. He promises to forget this feeling, forget this night, and forget how pretty Charlie Dalton is in moonlight.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I got a burst of inspiration to turn this into a full story. Enjoy!

Knox pulls away after that. Subconsciously, consciously, it didn't matter. He rushes out of shared classes. He sits far away from Charlie at meals. Never partners up with him for projects or study hall.

He's sure Charlie notices. He stops trying to catch Knox at the door, stops turning to him at meals, stops asking if he's okay.

His chest constantly feels like it's being crushed by a house. The weight of the idea that he's ruined one of his best friendships makes it hard to breathe, makes every heartbeat feel like his last. He promised he wouldn't talk about it, but not talking about it may kill him.

Neil says he's overreacting. Insists that Charlie hadn't said anything to him about Knox, not even during the whole break they spent together. The conversation only serves to worry Knox more.

He makes a silent pact with himself to talk to Charlie. Not right away, of course. He has to think about when and where and write down what he wants to say. He'll do it before spring break, he's sure.

Each day drags on and Knox gets no closer to facing his friend. Neil and Meeks try to force him to talk, they both do their best to pry answers out of him. Everyone knows Knox has to crack first, because Charlie has always been the most stubborn of the boys. He tells them he has a plan, that no he doesn't know what's happened, and yes he will talk to him soon. When the time is right.

He's getting ready for bed one evening, and does his usual routine: shower, put on pajamas, brush his teeth, and make sure Charlie is nowhere to be seen before walking back to his dorm. As soon as Knox steps out of the bathroom, however, his plans are interrupted by a hand slamming into his chest.

It's knocks the breath out of him, but it doesn't really hurt, he's just surprised. Even more surprised when the owner of the hand comes into focus.

"Charlie?" Knox coughs out.

“Hey, Knoxious.” Charlie is smirking, of course he is. “Long time, no see. Wanna talk?”

If he wasn’t so pissed at Charlie for deciding to do this while other students surrounded them, Knox would have been flattered that he was special enough for Charlie to break first. He whips his head around nervously, watching boys file in and out of the bathroom, before whispering, “do we have to do this here?”

Charlie lets his hand drop and rolls his eyes. “Cameron just started his shower. We can go to my room, we should have at least 10 minutes. Does that work?”

Knox nods and starts wordlessly following Charlie. He’s nervous. Why is he nervous? He doesn’t know what he wants to say yet. It’s not the time, why had Charlie decided it was the time?

Knox steps into the dorm, and Charlie double checks that no one sees them before closing the door. He shoves a chair under the knob as a pseudo lock system. Knox stares at the window and contemplates climbing out of it.

Before he can take a step forward, Charlie is speaking. “What’s going on with you?” Knox doesn’t answer, just takes a seat on Charlie’s bed and rubs his face in his hands. “I haven’t done anything to you, why are you giving me the cold shoulder?”

“Do you remember that night on the roof? Before the break?” It’s strange, Knox doesn’t even feel like he’s talking, but he hears the words leaving his mouth.

The other boy quirks an eyebrow and tilts his head. “Maybe? I remember getting wasted, and I know you helped me down, but-“ Charlie stops, and Knox can see the pieces click in his brain, watches his face as memories wash over him. If Charlie had hackles, Knox would have watched as they raised slowly. He watches as Charlie’s smile becomes a snarl. “Is that what this is about?”

“Charlie-“

“You asked me to kiss you while I was drunk, and I’m the one being punished? How is that fair?”

“I was scared-“

“Scared?” Charlie scoffs, “That’s a laugh.”

“I’m not like you Charlie! I don’t do that, I don’t like boys.” The moment Knox says it, he watches all the anger Charlie’s father has passed on to his son overcome the Dalton boy. Charlie pulls his fist back and Knox closes his eyes and braces for impact.

But impact never comes. Knox slowly opens his eyes, and watches Charlie sigh and lower his arm. He plops on the bed beside Knox and doesn’t flinch when their shoulders meld into one another. “I’m sorry,” Knox squeaks out, “I don’t know why I said that.”

“I know.” Charlie take a deep breath and his body starts to relax. The snarl fades away.

“And I don’t know why I asked you to kiss me. It was stupid.” Of course, Knox doesn’t think it’s stupid. He gets a sick feeling in his stomach accompanied by the want to do it again, to feel Charlie again.

“Horny teenage boys.” Charlie giggles as he says it, leaning a bit into Knox.

Knox realizes he’s been given an out. If he agrees, then he doesn’t have to dig inside himself and think about why he really wanted Charlie to kiss him, why he wants to kiss him now. If he was a better person, he wouldn’t take the out.

But Knox is an Overstreet. His father is a lawyer, his father before him was a lawyer, lying is in his blood. So he agrees, “stupid hormones.” And they laugh together. And Knox tricks himself into believing that this moment, their laughter, is more beautiful than anything the boys can do together.

When their laughter dies down, Knox clears his throat. “Does Neil know?” When Charlie doesn’t answer, “about you, I mean?”

“It hasn’t come up.” Charlie admits.

Knox nods, and the two look at each other for longer than two boys should. Knox feels a pull towards the Dalton boy, and swears that for a moment he sees Charlie start to lean in close.

The door rattles and startles them both. “What the hell, Dalton?” Cameron’s voice rings through the other side.

Charlie groans and stands to open the door. Knox grabs his arm. “Wait,” he whispers, “are we good?”

Charlie smiles and tousles the other boy's hair with his free hand. "We're good. Now let me go, before Cameron starts calling for Nolan." Knox does as he wishes.

The chair gets moved and the door is opened and Cameron stands on the other side. "That's not funny."

"Not supposed to be. Knox and I were talking."

Cameron enters the room and Knox awkwardly waves. "What about?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Charlie sneers. Knox stands up and heads to the door.

"Good night, guys." Knox looks at Charlie, "We'll talk more about that project later, yeah?"

Charlie looks confused for moment before nodding, "of course! Good night, Knoxious."

Knox walks back to his dorm with the sound of the two boys bickering following him. His head finds his pillow, and he lets sleep wash over him, thoughts of Charlie swirling in his brain.

Chapter 3

The week before his birthday, Knox's father gets him a present. The wrapping paper and card read "Happy Birthday," and Knox doesn't correct him on the date. He rips the paper open over his first good meal in weeks, a plus to going home. In his hands, he holds a leather bound book, with gold foiling on the bottom of the cover announcing "K. Overstreet."

A Bible. His father got him a new Bible for his "birthday." "Thank you, father. It's beautiful." The words feel automatic, and sound like a version of Knox he himself doesn't recognize.

His father nods and takes a bite of chicken. "Your old one has been getting ratty for years now, and I thought a nice one would be the perfect present. And, now you have one that matches me." Knox forces a smile, realizing what this is about. Making him a copy of his father.

The rest of the dinner drags on. His mother chirps about how excited she is that Knox is doing so well, and Mr. Overstreet reminds him he could always do better. His parents drive him back to Welton before curfew, and promise that they'll see him soon. Knox knows they won't.

He tucks the Bible away under his pillow. It makes for good support. He takes it out for Sunday worship, of course, but other than that it hides. Looking at it makes him feel sick. His father forgot when his birthday was. Or worse, he didn't forget, he just wanted to give Knox a message.

Could Mr. Overstreet somehow know about Charlie? Was he reminding his son to remain holy, unlike Charlie? Did his father know that no matter how many prayers or late night studying sessions, Knox couldn't shake the feeling of Charlie's lips on his?

Knox had kept his word, he doesn't avoid Charlie anymore. They sit together at meals and have returned to their normal class seats. But he does make an effort to avoid being alone with him too long.

When his actual birthday rolls around, Knox walks into the dining hall for breakfast with zero expectations. As soon as he's spotted, Charlie practically yells at him across the room, "Happy birthday, Knoxious!"

Knox smiles and waves off his friends while he grabs breakfast. He joins them at the table, taking a seat next to Charlie who bumps him with his shoulder. “Got any plans?”

“It’s a bit early for this, isn’t it?” Knox takes a bite of his eggs and swallows. The boys look at him, their faces painted with expectation. “I already celebrated,” he admits.

Neil and Meeks glance at the clock, obviously confused. How could he celebrate if he just woke up?

“Remember how I went home last week? My father got the date wrong.” The table grows heavy with silence. Knox ignores it, after all, all of their parents are like this. Why is it special for Knox. “He got me a new Bible.”

“That’s nice.” Cameron chimes in, “Could be worse.”

“It’s not a birthday gift.” Charlie insists and Neil nods in agreement.

“He customized it,” Knox explains through a mouthful of toast, “it has my name on it.”

“Oh, well in that case,” Neil’s voice is dripping with sarcasm. Knox understands why he’s Charlie’s best friends

“Well, what did your parents get you guys?” Knox is hoping to take some of the heat off of himself.

Of course Charlie speaks up first. “My father has promised me a saxophone.”

“Don’t you play clarinet?” Cameron asks, “Poorly, may I add.”

Cameron was smart to sit on the other side of the table, otherwise Charlie might have punched him out in front of everyone. “I hate clarinet. I begged my father for a sax, and he agreed. End of story.”

“No way, Dalton,” Neil is shaking his head. “I know how you talk to your father. How did you actually get him to agree?”

“Fine,” Charlie admits, “I told him I wouldn’t let my trig grade drop below an A all semester.”

Pitts finally speaks, “and how are you going to manage that?”

Charlie turns his attention to Meeks and grins, batting his eyelashes

for good measure. “Meeks is going to help me. Aren’t you, Meeksie?”

“Yes, sir.” Meeks replies, shoving his last bit of breakfast into his mouth. It was a dumb bit him and Charlie had started last year. Anything Charlie asks, Meeks is there with a “yes, sir.” It didn’t mean anything.

Though, Knox did wonder. Now that he knows that Charlie has kissed boys, it’s hard not to wonder if Meeks was one of them. He always followed the Dalton boy like a puppy, he’d do whatever Charlie asked. Knox couldn’t explain why the idea of it made his stomach do flips.

Disgust wasn’t right, after all that would make him a hypocrite. Jealousy? Certainly not, Charlie definitely didn’t belong to him and there was no actual proof anything had happened between the two.

“Sound good, Overstreet?” Cameron’s voice makes Knox realize he has been spaced out for most of the conversation.

“Sorry, I wasn’t listening. What’s up?”

“Study hall tonight.” Neil catches him up. The other boys start to gather their things and Knox realizes he must have missed the bell. He follows suit.

“I know it’s not the best celebration, but I’ll make it worth your while,” Charlie puts two fingers to his lips, mimicking smoking.

“Sounds great.” Knox follows the other boys down the hall the their first class.

The day passes agonizingly slow. Knox can’t make himself pay attention to anything his teachers spout, and it’s even harder in the classes he shares with Charlie. Charlie, who always sits next to him and kicks him under the desk, or bumps him with his shoulder.

Study group is equally boring, for the most part. Charlie was too busy begging Meeks for trig help, Neil was in his own world, and Pitts and Cameron were going over Latin homework.

Though every time Charlie or the other boys walked past Knox, he’d end up with another cigarette in his pocket. By the end of the night he had 15, just like his age. The candles on his nonexistent cake.

Nolan calls for bed and students file out. Knox hangs back, knowing Charlie is usually the last to leave. He grabs the Dalton boy’s wrist as

he stands to leave and Charlie gets the signal, waving Meeks and Neil on.

They stand alone in the room. “Thank you,” Knox says because it’s all he can think to say.

“For?”

“The cigs, it was a nicer gift than my father’s.”

Charlie nods, “anytime, Knoxious. Are you okay?”

“Have you ever kissed Meeks?” Charlie snatches his hand away and throws it up in shock.

“Woah, where did that come from?” Knox can’t tell if Charlie is actually upset or not. He’s good at hiding that sort of thing.

“I don’t know,” Knox stutters out, “it’s just with the whole… you know, way he acts around you…” His voice trails off.

Charlie shakes his head, “unbelievable. Are you jealous, Knox?” The way he’s looking at the Overstreet boy makes him feel like prey.

“No, of course not!” He was just curious. Why would Charlie say that? “I told you, I like girls.”

Charlie rolls his eyes. “I haven’t, for the record. Why would you ask me that?”

Knox shrugs, “What you told me on the roof, about you and boys…” his voice trails off.

“I don’t go around making out with anyone I see. Is that what you think of me?” Knox can see Charlie’s mask slip on the last part, something like pain paints his face.

“No! I just… I don’t know how that… works.” Knox is fumbling his words, trying to keep from upsetting his friend. “I mean, you kissed me.”

“You asked me to.” Charlie reminds him, and Knox knows it isn’t supposed to be a jab, but it feels like it. “What’s going on with you, Knox? Do you need to talk something out?” He’s never seen Charlie so genuine.

It almost makes him want to confide. Almost makes him want to

admit that he'd give all the cigarettes back, give up smoking and drinking and every other vice all together if it meant getting to kiss Charlie just one more time.

It almost makes him want to be honest. "I…" his voice trails off, a confession hanging in the air. He takes a step forward until they are almost touching. He's never been good with words, something his father takes every opportunity to criticize. He takes Charlie's hand in his and leans forward.

He's right there. Knox just has to close the minuscule gap and his brain will finally leave him alone.

"Knox…" Charlie's voice is soft. "If we don't go, Nolan is going to catch us." It's not a no, and the way Charlie is looking at him makes Knox wish Nolan would catch them. That he'd burst in, call their parents, and Knox and Charlie would get trouble. Maybe Charlie would be sent away and Knox would never have to think about this strange time in his life again.

"Sorry." Knox whispers. Charlie shakes his head.

"Let's go."

"Yeah." Charlie breaks first. He squeezes Knox's hand and pulls away, heading towards the showers. Knox follows, his head swimming.

What's wrong with him? What has Charlie done to him?

When he finally does get to the showers, he turns the water as hot as it can go. He breathes in the steam, letting it purge his sins. He's hoping the water will melt him, leave him in a puddle to be washed down the drain.

Knox thinks this is going to kill him.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I did not proofread this, carpe diem and all that

With a test coming up the next day, Meeks insists that he and Charlie have to cram as much trigonometry into the Dalton boy's head as possible. Cameron agrees to help by disappearing from the room as long as they need.

"Knox," Meeks had asked, "what about you? Grades hurting?"

Knox had nodded and given a nervous laugh, and Charlie begged him to join them. "I need someone there as a witness so Meeks doesn't kill me for my subpar math skills."

A part of Knox wants to ask him why he doesn't get Neil. But a bigger part of him gets warm knowing that Charlie wants him there over his best friend. So he agrees.

So now he sits in the room, listening to Meeks try and keep Charlie engaged while the Dalton boy groans and sighs in frustration. Knox is sitting on Charlie's bed and snickering at his misfortune.

"How about, let's take a break?" Meeks suggests, "I've gotta stretch my legs anyway." The redhead gets up without waiting for a response and Charlie hands him a cigarette like an apology for the frustration he's caused. Meeks gladly accepts, nodding in appreciation and stepping out of the room.

Charlie and Knox sit in silence for what feels like an eternity, but it is only a few seconds. Knox's body feels like lead, too heavy to move or speak. Luckily, Charlie is happy to break the silence.

"My father is going to kill me. Why can't I get this?" Charlie runs a hand through his hair. He stands up and closes the door, simultaneously pulling a cigarette out and lighting it as soon as the door clicks.

Charlie starts pulling out a second stick for his friend. Knox shrugs, "Maybe you'll look at the test tomorrow and all of the knowledge will come flooding over you." He accepts the cigarette and places it in his mouth, letting it hang from his lips as he pats himself down for a

lighter. Unable to find one, he looks to Charlie, “got a light?”

Charlie nods and reaches his hand up to hold Knox’s cigarette steady. Knox feels his breath hitch as the other boys fingers lay lightly against his lips. Charlie leans in and the end of his stick touches the end of Knox’s, the flame spreading between the two. Charlie watches the process delicately, and Knox feels his face grows hot. He lets his gaze fall the Charlie’s lips, pursed around the lit stick. When the flame catches, Charlie pulls away and Knox feels empty.

The first inhale feels incredible. As though the Dalton boy had turned into smoke and filled his lungs, infiltrating his body and making his way through Knox’s veins until he was infected by him. Charlie smiles at him and Knox swears he might faint.

“Cool. I’ve always wanted to try that, I can’t believe it worked.”

“Huh?” Knox is snapped out of his euphoria by Charlie’s comment.

“Lighting cigs off of each other.” He explains.

“Right,” Knox nods, “thank you.”

Charlie goes back to the desk, staring at the pages as though he could absorb everything he need to know if he just looked hard enough. Knox watches him.

Meeks will be back any moment, Knox knows this. He fears it’s the only thing keeping his from picking Charlie up and throwing him on one of beds, crashing lips to each other and begging Charlie to forget about numbers and learn about him instead. The image permeates his brain, so intense that he fears if Charlie looks his way he’ll see it.

Charlie groans and bangs his head against the desk, letting it lay there. A knock on the door sounds in the room, and Charlie’s “come in” Is muffled by the textbook his head is buried in. Meeks opens the door, smirking at the sight before him.

He pats Charlie’s shoulder, bringing the Dalton boy to attention. He sits up and takes a long drag off of his almost forgotten cigarette. “I think we just need to try something new.” Meeks suggests. “Chin up, Dalton. You’ll pass with flying colors, I’ll make sure of it.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, sir.”

It takes everything in Knox not to roll his eyes. He stands up and passes his unfinished cigarette off to Meeks. The redhead takes a drag in appreciation. “I’ll let you two focus, then. Good luck, Charlie. You’ve got this.”

“Take me with you, Knoxie.”

Meeks and Knox both let out small laughs at Charlie’s attempt. Knox walks out, letting Charlie’s complaining follow him.

He lets himself fall face first onto his bed, his nose landing right on the part of his pillow where the Bible lays. His roommate is doing homework at his desk and doesn’t acknowledge him. Knox likes it better that way.

He’s going to kiss Charlie, he’s decides right there, nose pressed to holy text. He’s going to kiss Charlie until they meld into one entity and their fathers will never find them again. Until the crushing responsibility of being them, a Dalton and an Overstreet, don’t matter anymore.

And hopefully, if he kisses him enough, all the shame and fear and disgust he has within himself will dissolve under the pressure of their lips.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Big angst, some spicy content, very exciting

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie actually does ace his test by some miracle of god.

Knox decides to enact his plan after soccer practice the day after. With a group of sweaty boys filing into the bathroom, Knox does his best to keep close to Dalton. As though god is on his side, they manage to be in the last group to shower, Meeks and Pitts taking the showers next them.

Growing up in all boys schools has made Knox an expert in navigating after-sports group showers, avoiding eye contact and trying to stop your eyes from wondering. With his current Charlie fixation, he wonders if every boy in this room has such a hard time with that second part.

One by one he watches his fellow students trickle out until it is just him and Charlie. Charlie turns off his water and shakes out his hair. Knox's breath hitches as some of the droplets lands on him.

"All done, Knoxious? Want to head to the dining hall?" Knox can't focus on Charlie's words, putting all his effort into keeping his eyes off of Charlie's lips.

Knox nods absentmindedly, before taking it back immediately. "Wait! I wanted to talk to you."

"Okay?" Charlie tilts his head in confusion, "All good, Overstreet?"

Knox looks around to ensure they're alone and takes a deep breath. He is trying to stay calm and cool, but he knows his whole body is blushing. He just hopes Charlie thinks it's from the hot water.

The buzzing of the lights mimics the buzzing in Knox's head as he carefully places a hand on Charlie's chest. "Knox…" Charlie's voice sounds a million miles away.

"I need to do this." He grabs Charlie's face and pulls him close. When their lips connect, Knox feels his whole body come to life. He slams

Charlie against the shower wall, and the other boy gasps underneath him as his back collides with the tiles.

Without thinking, Knox slips his tongue into Charlie's mouth. It's like everything he has been pushing down was pulled out of him the moment his lips came in contact with Dalton's.

Charlie pulls away and Knox whines at the loss. Charlie puts a finger to Knox's lips, and it takes everything in Knox not to swallow it. "Knoxie, everyone's waiting for us."

"Screw them."

"You don't want this."

"Don't tell me what I want, Dalton." He goes to lean in again but Charlie grabs him on either side and pushes him back. Damn rowing and how strong it's made Charlie.

"This isn't the place." Charlie demands, and suddenly Knox is very aware of how very naked they both are. Fitting, as Knox is stripping himself bare to touch Charlie in this way.

Knox backs away and nods, reaching for a towel to cover himself. "You're right, I'm sorry. I just can't stop thinking about you, Charlie. It's driving me insane."

Charlie nods, "Me too, Knoxie. But if anyone sees…" his voice trails off and Knox feels the implications constrict around his heart like a snake. If anyone sees, none of it will matter. If anyone sees, their fathers will know, and only God knows what happens then. Nothing good.

"I know." Knox whispers, handing Charlie a towel and keeping himself from looking down. "I don't know what came over me."

Charlie graciously accepts the towel and uses it to cover up. "It's okay," his smile is infectious. "Let's go to my room, leave the others to dinner. We can talk there."

Knox is giddy. He nods and starts grabbing at clothes, throwing them on clumsily. His sweater is backwards, but he doesn't mind.

They slink through the halls, avoiding classmates and teachers to arrive at Charlie and Cameron's room. Knox has barely closed the door before he's grabbing Charlie and slamming him onto the bed.

“Knox-“ Charlie is cut off by Knox crashing lips together, reveling in the sweet taste of everything that is Charlie.

He doesn’t want to talk. Doesn’t want to think. The moment he lets himself think, Mr. Overstreet’s voice will consume him and end this perfect fantasy Knox has constructed.

He’s undoing the buttons on Charlie’s shirt and basking in the sweet sounds the future banker makes under him. When he pulls away from his lips and starts on Charlie’s neck, the Dalton boy speaks.

“We should really talk about this,” followed by a breathy, “fuck, Knox,” when Knox gives a small bite to the dip where neck meets shoulder. The way Charlie arches against him makes him feel feral, all of his teenage hormones flooding his head until nothing else matters but the boy under him.

“Later,” Knox practically begs into Charlie’s fresh washed skin. Let the talk come later. Let the shame come later. Let the reality come later.

For now, he’s reaching a hand down to undo Charlie’s belt. He almost gets it unbuckled, he’s right there, and Charlie grabs his wrist.

‘No,’ he wants to scream, ‘we can’t stop. I can’t stop.’

“Wait,” Charlie says. “What is this?”

Everything in Knox is collapsing. He wants to tell Charlie that this is him finally feeling full, that this him letting himself love and be loved.

But his brain flashes with images of what his father has raised him for. His name on his father’s firm. White picket fence and a dog. A beautiful wife and a son to carry on the family name.

So instead, he says: “Soccer practice must have made my hormones go wild.”

Charlie’s face drops. “So this is just meaningless sex?”

‘No, nothing with you could ever be meaningless’

“Yes.” Why did he say that. Why did Charlie have to stop a good thing? Why couldn’t they be entangled right now, studying each others bodies more than they ever studied for classes?

That seems to be all it takes to unlock that anger in Charlie, the kind that makes it feel like the shadow of Mr. Dalton is looming in the

room. “Why are you doing this to me?” He yells.

Knox looks around, “You might want to stay quiet-“

“That’s rich! You didn’t seem to care when you were seconds away from fucking me in the bathroom.” Knox doesn’t correct him that it’s not about other people hearing. It’s more about how he wants Charlie to calm down so he can save this, so they don’t have to fight.

Knox doesn’t want to fight. But he also knows that it’s his own fault for not being honest. He feels the breath leave him as Charlie pushes him off.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” The first honest thing Knox says and it’s still not the whole truth.

“And why is that my problem?” Charlie is starting to get up now, buttoning his shirt as fast as he can with shaking hands.

“It’s not-“

“Damn right it’s not!” He’s in Knox’s face now. “I can’t keep doing this with you. I do want you, Knox. But only if you want me. None of,” he gestures vaguely, “whatever this is.”

Of course Knox wants him. He wants him more than anything. More than his father’s good will, more than the future he’s planned, more than air.

But Knox doesn’t say any of that. In fact, he says nothing at all.

It seems Charlie gets tired of waiting for a response. “You’re a coward, Overstreet.” He spits, and it hurts so much more than any punch Charlie could have delivered.

“I know.”

“I shouldn’t even be talking to you.”

“You’re right.”

“I don’t deserve this.”

“I know. Charlie, I promise I know.”

“What was your plan?” That stops Knox in his tracks. He will be honest. He has to be. He can’t let his friendship slip through his

fingers.

“I thought,” he starts, “if I could just get it out of my system, it would be over. I would never think of you or any other boy again and I could go back to being normal.” He watches Charlie recoil on the last word.

“So you were using me?” He says it so eerily calm. He’s smoothing out his hair, Charlie is sending a message: say something to make me stay.

And Knox could say a million things. That he’s never felt more at home than when he and Charlie were touching. That the laughter that Charlie brought out in him brightened every corner of his soul. But he has responsibilities. A future to uphold.

“I won’t do it again.”

“Damn right you won’t,” Charlie starts walking towards the door. “I’m going to leave while I’m still considering being your friend.”

“Charlie, please-“

“Don’t touch me-“

“It wasn’t supposed to go like this-“

“Stop!” Charlie is ripping his hand free from Knox’s grasp. His face softens, like he’s begging Knox not to mess this up any more. “Please.”

Knox stands dumbfounded as Charlie walks away, off to enjoy Hellton hash. Knox finds himself losing his appetite. He makes his way to his own room, flops down on the bed, and feels his body burn with the tears flooding out of him.

He kicks and silently screams and curses himself. If he could just shake everything he’s been raised to believe he could be happy. But he can’t, he knows he can’t.

He holds his custom Bible and prays that Charlie will forgive him. Please God, he can’t lose Charlie.

Chapter End Notes

> Thinking that I will write a Charlie chapter next, so get excited for that!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Oops, my hand slipped and a Charlie chapter came out

Charlie was a phenomenal actor. He should win awards for every one of his roles: the compliant son, the unfazed comedian, and the role he took on now as someone who was calm and didn't just have the biggest fight with one of his best friends. He walks up to the table and Neil greets him first, of course.

"Hey, slick," Neil chimes, "we thought you ditched us." Charlie grins and takes a seat next to his best friend. Two untouched plates sit at the table, the one he now sits in front of and one for Knox.

"Never! Knox wasn't feeling well. I walked him back to his room." The boys nod in understanding, believing the performance Charlie has laid out. Except, of course, for Neil, who is giving him the 'we'll talk later' look.

Charlie simply pretends not to see it. Instead of reacting, he splits the roll on his plate in half, raising it in the air like a chalice. "I'd like to propose a toast! Thank you, Steven Meeks. For without you, I wouldn't have never passed my awful trig test."

Meeks blushes a bit from the attention, but responds with a steady voice. "All in a days work, Dalton."

The boys all turn back to their meals, giggling and talking about nothing. Neil nudges Charlie, leaning in to whisper, "What's really going on?"

Charlie waves him off, and Neil looks hurt. So, Charlie whispers back, "We can talk later, okay? In private."

Neil seems satisfied with that answer. Charlie feels so stiff, like invisible walls are closing in on him. He can't focus on anything his friends are saying, his mind still pinned under the weight of Knox. His hand absentmindedly reaches up to his neck, feeling the ghost of Knox's lips there.

"Mr. Dalton!" Nolan's voice combined with Neil kicking him under the table snaps Charlie back to reality.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Nolan. Still a bit tired from practice.” He apologizes, his voice easily slipping into cadence his father has beat into him to use when addressing adults.

“Your father is on the phone,” Nolan informs him, “he’s interested in your test scores.”

Charlie nods, using all his willpower to suppress a groan at the idea of talking to his father. At least he has good news to report.

Neil and Meeks both nod at him as Charlie gets up from the table and makes his way to the phones. He watches Nolan say a few more words to his father before handing the phone to Charlie and disappearing.

“Charles?” His father voice rings through the other side.

“Yes father, it’s me. How are you this evening?” Charlie hates talking like this. It feels so fake, so forced, so not him. But he knows what happens if he doesn’t.

“I know I’m later than usual for our weekly call, work has been very busy.” Charlie can hear the pride in his father’s voice when reporting success. “I was calling mostly to inquire about that trigonometry test.”

“Actually,” Charlie brightens up a bit at the mention of the only good thing that’s happened to him this week, “I aced it. An A, if you’ll believe it.”

“I don’t.” Anyone else would think his father is disappointed, but Charlie knows that’s his version of a joke. “How did you manage that?”

His father is in a good mood. Good. Charlie should keep the conversation short to avoid it souring. “My friend, Me- uh, Steven helped me out, actually. He’s a genius, sir.” Charlie has to force himself to use Meek’s first name. It feels so unnatural.

“Steven? The Meeks boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

His father grows silent for a moment, and Charlie fears he’s said something wrong. When his father does finally speak, Charlie lets go of a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Your mother was wanting me to have you home next weekend. Perhaps Steven can join us one night for dinner, as a thank you.”

His heart does flips. Invites to his home were rare, and Charlie can only hope his father will be in a good mood when Meeks is there. “Yes, sir,” he responds, “that sounds delightful. I’ll be sure to ask if he’d care to join us. Is Mel home?” He doesn’t know why he’s suddenly so overcome with the feeling to talk to his sister. Maybe to tell her about his high test score, or to get excited that he was coming home for a few days.

“Melanie is at a friend’s house.” Charlie feels a wave of sadness crash over him, suddenly very homesick. “Don’t worry, Charles. I’ll be sure to tell her you were asking after her.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Anything else?”

“No, sir.” Charlie is sure he could tell him more. About classes, ask if Neil can come over too, talk about his mother. But he knows this game too well, the shorter the conversation the better.

“Good,” Mr. Dalton speaks, “be good, Charles. I’ll see you and Steven on Friday.” His father hangs up without a proper goodbye and Charlie runs his hands through his hair in frustration.

Not a moment of reprieve is allowed as overlapping chatter fills the halls around him. Dinner has let out. Charlie runs his hands over his face and forces a smile, scanning the crowd for his target.

The red curls are unmistakable, bouncing in time with Meeks’s steps.

“Meeksie!” Charlie calls out, and his friend’s head snaps towards him. Neil and Pitts follow the redhead as he makes his way to Charlie.

“So?” Meeks greets, “Is your father impressed?”

“Very,” Charlie answers. “In fact, he’s invited you to join us for dinner next weekend. As a thank you.”

Neil’s eyes widen. “An invitation to the esteemed Dalton manor?” He jests, “Wow, Meeks, you must feel very special!”

Charlie snickers at his friend’s sarcasm. Meeks is anxiously fidgeting with his hands. “I mean,” the redhead speaks, “of course I’ll go. Any meal outside of Welton is worth it. Just one question?”

Charlie tilts his head, giving Meeks permission to ask. A devilish grin

lights up Meeks' face, "Will your sister be there?"

All the boys laugh as Charlie gives him a gentle shove. They start to file to their rooms, and Neil places a hand on Charlie's arm to get his attention. It causes the Dalton boy to jump in surprise.

"Come with me to my room." Neil whispers.

"I said private," Charlie hisses.

Neil shakes his head, "My roommate always goes home on the weekends. No escaping this, Dalton."

Charlie holds in a protest, knowing denying his best friend is pointless. They dip into Neil's room and Perry takes a seat on his own bed, motioning for Charlie to sit on his roommates side.

Charlie chooses to stand, like he has any power here.

"What's going on with you?" Neil starts.

"Nothing," Charlie shrugs. "Is that all?"

"Charlie," Neil uses that voice that he knows can pull anything out of his friend. "We don't keep secrets."

That makes Charlie's blood boil, he's been so on edge lately it doesn't take much to set him off. "This isn't some playground thing, Neil. This is serious."

"I wouldn't know," Neil stays calm. He's good at that, staying calm in the face of Charlie's rage. It always takes the wind out of Charlie's sails, making him feel like a kid throwing a tantrum more than anything. "You won't talk to me."

Charlie lets out a sigh, letting the fight deflate out of his body. He takes seat next to Neil, leaning slightly into his friend as a silent apology. "I don't know how."

"Just talk." Neil leans against Charlie as well, a 'no problem.' "I'll always listen."

"I know," he does. Neil has never judged Charlie, and Charlie has never appreciated him enough for that. "No one can know."

"Okay."

“I mean it, if my father found out…”

“I promise, Charlie.” He offers his pinkie out in a promise that Charlie accepts.

“I kissed Knox.” The confession leaves his lips before Charlie can think. Maybe that’s what’s best in this kind of situation, not thinking. Just talking. So he talks more, “Well, he asked me to. And I did. And then he kissed me today. Which is why I was late to dinner. And then my dad called. And then you wanted to talk. It just doesn’t stop.”

Neil’s face doesn’t change, and Charlie doesn’t know if it helps or hurts. Part of him wants Neil to confirm everything his dad has said, to call him disgusting and tell him to never talk to him again. But he doesn’t. He just nods.

“You like boys?” Neil asks. Rightfully so, but it still puts Charlie back on edge.

“And girls,” Charlie sputters out, as if that helps anything. Then he admits, “mostly boys.” Mostly Knox.

“You never told me.” Neil looks more upset at the fact that Charlie didn’t confide in him than he is that Charlie kisses boys.

Charlie shrugs, “I haven’t told anyone. Sober, anyway.” It would be freeing to say out loud, if it wasn’t undercut by the fear. “Now Knox is acting so weird and I can’t stand it.” He lets himself fall back on the bed. “He says doesn’t like boys like that and then kisses me in the showers? What’s that about?” Charlie is relaxing now, musing to the ceiling as Neil’s calming presence works its magic.

“Does Knox also…” it hangs in the air, but the question is clear.

“I don’t know! He says he doesn’t, but that’s not what he’s showing.” Charlie lets out a half laugh, “You know, it’s funny. I’ve always been so afraid of someone finding out, but I’ve never been ashamed of it. Until Knox.” Knox has made Charlie feel shame, a shame that he’s never carried in his life. Knox’s shame is contagious and it’s rubbing off on the Dalton boy.

“You aren’t the only one whose parents have high expectations,” Neil points out.

“I know.” Charlie gets quiet.

“Maybe Knox did like boys, until he kissed you.” Humor laces Neil’s voice and Charlie responds with a lighthearted shove. They both laugh, and Charlie feels light again. Like all the weight of the situation that has been consuming him is gone, thanks to none other than Neil Perry. “Give him time.” Neil advises, “Enjoy your trig victory for now.”

Charlie sits up and hugs Neil, finding comfort in the way Neil hugs back. “I gotta go to bed before Cameron starts freaking out and asking where I’ve been. Thank you, Neil. For everything.”

Neil just nods and pats Charlie’s back, pulling back and breaking the hug. “Any time, slick. And don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” And Charlie knows it is, knows it would have been if he had told sooner.

They say their good nights and Charlie shuffles across the hall, thanking the stars above that Cameron is already asleep.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Some slight Meeks and Charlie action

The week came and went, time moving faster than Charlie wanted, like the world wanted to see him home. Charlie hated the world, if that's the case.

He doesn't avoid Knox and Knox doesn't avoid him. They both act like nothing happened, waiting for the other to break first. Charlie isn't falling for it, if Knox wants to pretend forever then he will too.

He knocks on Meeks' door frame, peering his head in to see his friend packing the last of his overnight bag. "Ready?" He asks.

"Yes, sir!" Meeks replies, zipping his bag up. Charlie feels a cold spread through his chest.

"None of that at my house, okay?" Especially not in front of his father. Mr. Dalton barely likes hearing others call his son 'Charlie.'

Meeks joins him at the door, bag in hand. He's wearing his Welton uniform, just like Charlie asked. He wants them to look their best. "Got it. I'll solely refer to you as Sir Charles of House Dalton."

Charlie lets out a short laugh, "you're forgetting 'First of His Name, Sole Male Heir to the Dalton fortune.'"

That makes Meeks' nose crinkle as he snorts out a laugh, a sound that makes warmth creep back into Charlie's soul. He watches as the redhead's face quickly falls, typically a sign of a teacher around.

Sure enough, Dr. Hagar is standing behind them, keys in hand. "Are you boys ready?"

They both nod, mumbling "yes, sir," as they follow him to the car.

Charlie is uncharacteristically quiet the entire car ride, being distracted by hearing his own heartbeat echoing through his body. Meeks follows his example, staying quiet as well. The only interaction between the boys is when Meeks gently places a hand on Charlie's leg, making him stop the bouncing he hadn't even noticed he was doing. He mouths an apology and Meeks just smiles back.

They pull up to the Dalton house, or maybe mansion is more fitting, and Meeks can't keep his mouth closed. He stares in awe at the large building and Charlie watches, finding his fascination cute.

Where Meeks sees wonder, Charlie sees darkness. Years of oppression and abuse represented by a single building. The car pulls up and both boys scurry out, overnight bags in hand. Charlie thanks Hagar, assuring him that they'll be back before the week starts and will not need a ride.

The walk up to the door is both too short and too long, mimicking the house made of paradoxes. When they reach the door, Charlie doesn't know whether to knock or just walk in. This place is so foreign to him, calling it home feels wrong.

He must have been staring at the door for longer than is considered 'normal,' because Meeks lays a hand on his shoulder. "Charlie," he all but whispers, "let's go inside. I'm freezing."

Charlie nods, opening the door. His sister is right there, jumping on him and making him drop his bag. "Mel!" He exclaims.

"It's so good to see you!" She smells like his mother, and Charlie wonders if she stole Mrs. Dalton's perfume.

"Likewise." He can't help it, he's smiling. His sister is his only reprieve in this house and he is going to bask in it as long as he can.

Mel faces Meeks and extends a hand, "You must be Charlie's friend! I'm Mel." She's grinning from ear to ear, and in this light she is a spitting image of their mother when she was young. Before she became a Dalton.

"Steven Meeks," Meeks drops his bag to shake her hand. "It's a pleasure." Charlie forgets how charming Meeks can be when he wants to, with his soft smile and gentle eyes. He suddenly feels a little better about this dinner.

Good things don't last, however, and Charlie can feel his father's presence before he announces himself in the room. Charlie subconsciously steps between Mel and his father.

"Charles," Mr. Dalton greets, "it's good to see you home."

"Thank you, father." Charlie feels like it's being dragged out of him.

“Melanie, go help your mother finish dinner.” He turns his attention to his daughter who nods and scurries away. “You must be Steven.” Mr. Dalton is looking at Meeks like a cat looks at a mouse. He reaches his hand out and Charlie wants to slap it away, doesn’t want his father’s touch to ruin his friends like it’s ruined him.

Meeks seems unfazed, though, accepting the hand with a firm handshake. “Yes, sir. Thank you for having me in your home, it’s lovely.”

“My wife decorates it, I’m sure she’ll appreciate the compliment.” Mr. Daltons stoic exterior never waivers. Charlie wonders if Meeks can feel the tension filling the room. “Charles, why don’t you show Steven to his room? We’ll talk more over dinner.”

“Yes, sir.” Every word Charlie speaks in his father’s presence makes his throat raw, like someone is shoving barbed wire down his trachea. “Where is he sleeping?” His father makes a face, and Charlie follows it with a “Sir?”

“Your mother has made up the upstairs guest room for him. I will send Melanie to grab you two when dinner is ready.” Charlie can’t grab his and Meeks’ bags quick enough, trying not to run up the stairs.

“Your room is next to mine,” he explains once they reach the top of the staircase, “which is nice.” Meeks nods, following Charlie into the bedroom. “I’m sorry about my father, by the way. I know he can be-“

“Intense?” Meeks finishes the thought, taking his bag from Charlie’s hand. Charlie just nods, not saying what he’s thinking: that his father is more than intense. He’s terrifying. But Meeks just waves a hand through the air, “Don’t stress. He’s just like Knox and Neil’s dads. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Charlie knows that’s not true. His father is way worse than Neil and Knox’s, but he lets it slide. Meeks is being nice. “You don’t have to stay here tonight, if you don’t want to. I’d understand. I can call the school and-“

Meeks places a hand on Charlie’s face and it quiets him immediately. “Charlie. Of course I want to stay. What is wrong with you?”

Charlie tries not to move, fearing that any movement away or towards the hand keeping him grounded would mean it disappears. “It’s this place,” he admits, “it brings out the worst in me.”

He is daring enough to place his own hand over Meeks'. Meeks just nods in understanding. "Not at home here, not at home at Welton. Where is your home?"

'With Knox,' he thinks, and then considers the feeling he has in this moment and it changes to 'with you.'

He thinks about what Knox asked, about whether he had kissed Meeks. Charlie hadn't thought about it before Knox planted the idea in his head, but looking at Meeks now he could imagine it. He was very pretty, with pale skin and hair Charlie wanted to play with all day. His face and hands decorated in freckles that Charlie couldn't count if he dedicated a week to just that. He passively wonders how many more lie under Meeks' blazer.

"Charlie…" Meeks' voice is soft, pulling Charlie back into the moment.

"Yeah?" Charlie whispers back.

A Cheshire grin spreads across Meeks' face. "Is your sister single?"

Charlie pushes the laughing boy onto the bed behind him, partly in jest and partly to hide the blush that's creeping up his face. Charlie picks up a pillow and starts landing soft hits on Meeks who just continues to giggle. "I was just asking!" Meeks manages to get out between trying and failing to catch his breath.

A small knock on the door frame alerts the boys to Mel. "What's going on here?" She's smiling.

"Meeks is asking after you, I told him you weren't available." Charlie informs her. He is aware in his peripheral that Meeks is slowly standing back up.

"And what if I am?" She winks at Meeks and his whole face turns red. Charlie rolls his eyes.

"Very funny, you two. Dinner?"

Mel nods and the three walk down to the dining room. Mr. Dalton sits at the head of the table with Mrs. Dalton sat beside him. She is nursing a glass of wine and if Meeks' wasn't here, Charlie would have asked how many that was. But he needed to keep the peace, at least while his friend was here.

"Charlie," his mother greets, "welcome home!" He gives her a brief

side hug before taking to seat next to Meeks.

They struggle through a prayer and last a whole 2 minutes before Mr. Dalton feels the need to speak. “So,” he starts, “Steven. How did you manage to get Charles an A?”

Meeks just shrugs, taking a gracious bite of chicken. He is sure to swallow it before continuing, knowing how important manners are. “It was all your son, sir.” Charlie’s heart is warmed by Meeks’ confidence in him.

“No, genuinely,” Mr. Dalton continues, “did you cheat? Hand him the answers?”

Charlie starts to feel his blood simmer. He knows his father is trying to get a reaction out of him, acting like this when his friend is here. He won’t give him the satisfaction.

“No, sir.” Meeks shakes his head, “I may have helped him understand, but Charlie really studied hard for that grade. He deserves the credit.”

Mr. Dalton just laughs. “We’ll see if he can keep it up.”

Meeks must feel Charlie tense up like he’s about to pounce, because he sneaks a hand under to table to squeeze his knee. A silent message: don’t make it worse than it is.

“Mrs. Dalton, this dinner is incredible.” Meeks changes this subject, and Charlie’s mom smiles in appreciation.

“Thank you, Steven. It must be nice to have a home cooked meal instead of cafeteria food.”

Meeks nods, shoving another piece in his mouth. “Very. And I can’t thank you both enough for letting me stay tonight. The bed here is much more comfortable than Welton.”

Charlie watches his father tense up, clearly unhappy with jokes being made at the expense of Welton. Sometimes he’s convinced his father loves that building more than his children. Charlie nudges Meeks.

“Though,” Meeks corrects himself, “I am grateful for Welton. I know I’m getting an opportunity not every boy does.”

His father seems happy with that response, relaxing and taking a bite of dinner. “I wish my son saw it that way.” Talking about Charlie like

he's not here, classic.

"Charlie likes Welton, right Charlie?" Meeks is defending him. It's sweet.

"Of course," Charlie takes a bite and swallows, "my friends are there."

"School isn't about making friends. That's why your grades are so low." Charlie can't stop himself from pushing the chair back as he stands up, tired of listening to his father's jabs.

"Charlie, sit down." His mother scolds. He ignores her with a tight lipped smile.

"I'm not feeling well," he announces, "I'm going to bed." He is vaguely aware of his father and Meeks both getting up to follow him.

"Charles," his father calls after him as Charlie makes his way to the staircase. "We have a guest, you're being rude."

"It's really okay, Mr. Dalton!" Meeks' voice follows him, "If Charlie isn't feeling well-"

"You're being immature." Charlie keeps ignoring it, hoping if he can just get to his room and lock the door it will all go away. "Come back here, you're upsetting your mother."

Charlie turns around in time to see Meeks reaching for Mr. Dalton's arm, maybe trying to slow him down. Charlie watches as his father shakes the smaller boy off of him, knocking him to the ground.

Charlie freezes, stuck between wanting to make sure Meeks is okay and wanting to run and hide. His father is coming closer to him.

He chooses to run and hide. He looks to one of the many crosses decorating the home's walls and asks for forgiveness, though he isn't sure if he is asking God or Meeks.

He reaches the safety of his room, but his father is right behind him, not giving him a chance to lock the door.

"Sit down." His father spits through gritted teeth.

Charlie complies, sitting on his bed. "Father-"

"Stop. You embarrassed me and ruined the lovely dinner your mother cooked."

“It’s not ruined,” Charlie points out.

“Who would want to eat after a show like that?” His father retorts.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Charlie feels himself sink back into being a kid, being so scared of his father.

“I ask you to come home, I even let you bring a friend, and this is how you act?”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Steven is a nice kid,” Mr. Dalton comments.

“Yes, sir.”

“Too nice to be hanging around you. You’re a bad influence, Charles.”

“I know, sir.”

“I’ll take you both back to Welton in the morning. For now, pull yourself together and come finish dinner before you give your sister and mother a heart attack.” Mr. Dalton smoothes his blazer down, a ritual in calming down.

“Yes, sir.” His father turns to leave, slamming the door behind him. Charlie takes a shaky breath, then another, until he’s taken enough shaky breaths to equal one normal one. He blinks tears out of his eyes and runs a hand through his hair. He has to go back out there, he can’t leave Meeks and Mel alone with that man.

His return back to the table is short of a celebration, everyone quietly finishing their meals while Mr. Dalton watches. When Charlie takes his seat beside Meeks, the redhead squeezes his hand under the table. Charlie gives a look of apology and Meeks just shakes his head.

When they finish, Mr. Dalton disappears to his study before anyone can follow him. Mel and Charlie’s mother start clearing plates, and Charlie helps, following them to the kitchen. Meeks follows, of course he does. He always follows Charlie.

After dishes are dropped in the sink, Charlie’s mother pulls him into a hug. “It really is good to see you home.”

“I know.” He replies, unfeeling.

“You know how your father gets, please don’t be mad at him.”

“Okay.”

She gives him one last squeeze before letting go and shooing the boys out of the kitchen. Charlie doesn’t hesitate to leave.

“Are you okay?” He asks Meeks on the way to their rooms. “You fell.”

“Yeah, thanks. It was nothing, really. I’m fine.” Meeks doesn’t sound mad, but Charlie is so scared he is. So scared that they’ll never talk again after this, that he just ruined his friendship. “Can I see your room?”

Charlie shrugs, “It’s nothing special.” It’s not, it looks almost identical to the guest room. Charlie isn’t home enough to claim it as his.

“That’s not what I asked.” Meeks points out. Charlie doesn’t answer him, and Meeks follows anyway, stepping into the room and closing the door.

Charlie wastes no time laying down on the bed, and Meeks follows him. Of course. The redhead sits on the edge of the bed. Then adjusts to sit more on the bed. Then lays down next to Charlie and pulls him in close for a hug.

“Are you okay?” He whispers, and Charlie nods, caught off guard by the sudden full body touch.

“It’s nothing.” Charlie insists, but the tighter Meeks hugs him to more he feels like crying. “Nothing I can’t handle.” He says, unsure if he’s trying to convince himself or Meeks.

“You shouldn’t have to handle it, though.” Meeks lets go and lays on his back. They sit there, on Charlie’s queen size bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Everyone’s fathers are like that.” Charlie tries.

“Not mine.” Meeks shoots back, and it makes something in Charlie’s chest ache.

Meeks hand finds Charlie’s and they intertwine. Neither of them comment on it, Charlie is just happy to have an anchor to keep him here in this moment.

“Your mother and sister are nice.” Meeks comments.

“Yeah,” Charlie replies, “Mel is wonderful. I worry about her.” He

doesn't have anything to say about his mother. He used to be the biggest mama's boy in Vermont, but having her watch his fathers abuse again and again and do nothing about it has soured their relationship. She doesn't find him worth protecting, he won't find her worth loving.

"About guys like me breaking her heart?" Meeks jests.

"Slow down there, ace." He squeezes Meeks hand, just to see if he'll squeeze back. He does. "You aren't the heartbreaking type."

"You don't know," Charlie doesn't have to look over to know Meeks is smiling, he can hear it in his voice. "I could be a bad boy."

Charlie lets out a small laugh, "As if!" He thinks about what his father said, about him being a bad influence.

"Fine, I won't break her heart." He concedes, "I'll turn her into a Meeks."

"Get out of my room." Charlie deadpans. But neither of them move.

"Is he always like that?" Meeks' voice comes out small.

"I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

So they don't talk, for about ten minutes. They run thumbs over backs of hands, at some point Charlie gently kisses Meeks' fingers.

Charlie feels so comfortable in this moment. He almost forgets he's home. Like his room exists in a void, away from all that is bad as long as Meeks is here.

He lightly bumps Meeks, gauging if he's still awake. "Yeah?" The redhead softly responds.

"Just seeing if you're awake."

"I am."

"Yeah." Charlie is suddenly very aware of the fact that he's in a home with his father. That all it takes to ruin this is Mr. Dalton bursting in and catching them. "You should go back to your room." He says.

"Okay." Meeks doesn't move.

Despite his deeper impulses, Charlie pulls his hand away. "I mean it,

Meeksie.”

Meeks sits up, nodding. “I know. See you in the morning?”

“Back to Hell-ton.” Charlie responds.

“Goodnight, Charlie.”

“Good night, Meeksie.”

He watches as Meeks leaves, wanting to stop him but knowing this is how it needs to go.

Charlie doesn’t get much sleep that night. His brain swims in thoughts of Meeks and Knox and his sister and his father and-

This is why he hates being home. His head is always so loud here, it’s awful.

Tonight, he won’t sleep. In the morning, he’ll get up and him and Meeks will climb in his father’s car. They will drive back to Welton and his father will give him a cold goodbye, and Charlie will return it. Neil will be waiting for him and Meeks to hear all about the night.

Charlie will tell him it was fine and that his father loves Meeks. Meeks will likely say nothing.

Tomorrow, he will be at Welton. Tomorrow will be better.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> Something short and sweet after that last beat of a chapter, as a treat

Knox doesn't need to be told to know that Charlie is back. All of his friends are gathered around his and Cameron's doorway, which Knox is sure Cameron isn't too happy about. Charlie has a way of doing that, of drawing in an audience to every mundane thing that happens to him.

He pushes past Pitts to stand at the front. Charlie is reclined on his bed, hands behind his head. Meeks is sat on the floor next to him, eyes locked on Charlie's face.

"Hey, Knoxious!" Charlie smiles at him in greeting. Knox feels his stomach do cartwheels. "We were just talking about our night away from Hell-ton. Good food, comfortable bed-"

"Charlie's sister." Meeks interjects with a mischievous grin.

Knox had never met Melanie Dalton, he only knew about her from stories that Charlie had told him. "What's she like?" He asks, not sure why he's all that interested.

"Well, I'm not one to kiss and tell-"

Meeks is cut off by Charlie shoving him by his head. Meeks laughs, fretting with his curls.

Charlie addresses the room of boys, "Nothing happened between them, no matter what Meeks would have you believe."

"How can you be so sure?" Meeks continues to tease, a dangerous game with Charlie Dalton.

"Careful, Meeksie." Charlie play warns. All the boys around him are laughing and talking amongst themselve. Knox is only looking at Charlie. And Charlie is looking at Meeks.

He wants to shoo everyone out of the room, tell Cameron to take a hike, and apologize to Charlie for his inability to be consistent. But he knows he doesn't have the right to. So instead, he joins the

conversation in the only way he can think.

“What do the rest of us have to do to get an invite to the esteemed Dalton home?” He watches as Meeks’ face drops, he starts fidgeting with his hands in his lap. Such an intense mood shift, it makes Knox feel uneasy.

Charlie is unaffected, though, that wonderful smirk never leaving his lips. “Depends, Knoxie. What class can you make me a genius in?”

Knox throws his hands up, feigning defeat. “You’re right, Meeks is the only one with any chance in getting through those golden gates.” Knox feels himself being shoved out of the way and looks to see Pitts joining him.

“C‘mon, Meeks.” He summons, “It’s the weekend. We have a project to finish before Monday.” Meeks nods, standing up to join his roommate. With the two boys departure, the rest of the crowd follows until it’s just Knox, Neil, Charlie, and Cameron.

“So,” Neil slinks over to Charlie’s bed and takes Meeks’ spot. “How are you actually doing, slick? I know how hard going home can be.”

“I’m fine, Neil. Really. It was just one night. You worry too much.” They are talking like Knox and Cameron aren’t even there. Not that Cameron seems to mind, curled up on his bed reading a textbook and probably feeling grateful Charlie’s attention isn’t on him.

Knox stands in the doorway, awkward, like he’s waiting for an invite into the room he’s been in almost everyday since the start of the year. Charlie and Neil are talking, but Knox can’t understand them over the sound of his nerves.

“Knoxious!” The way Charlie says it makes Knox think he’s missed his name being called more than once. He makes eye contact with Charlie and Charlie seems to take that as confirmation of his attention. “Stop just standing. Come in, close the door.”

Knox obliges, joining Neil on the floor. Charlie starts passing out cigarettes like candy. He even throws one over to Cameron, who tucks it behind his ear for later.

“Did your parents like Meeks?” When he realizes that may come across as jealousy, Knox course corrects with, “I’m pretty sure all parents like him. Mine met him once, and now my mother wants to adopt him and my father keeps asking if he has any interest in law. I

think he's trying to replace me."

Neil laughs, "Oh yeah, my father never stops telling me how I should be more like Meeks." They all pass around stolen lighters, sparking flames and filling the room with smoke.

"Yeah," Knox coughs through the smoke, "next time I get home, I'm sure my father will hand me a business card that says 'Overstreet and Meeks: attorneys at law.'"

"Parents like me, too." Cameron interjects, trying to join the conversation.

Charlie waves him off, "Parents like you because you're a rat. Parents like Meeks because he's a charmer."

"Yeah," Neil tacks on, "and he's adorable. The kind of boy you'd want taking your daughter out."

"According to him, he's already on that road with your sister, Charlie. Gotta say, pretty jealous." Knox chimes, as though Melanie is the Dalton child he wants.

Charlie shakes his head. "Don't listen to Meeks. He couldn't get Mel if he was the only man on the planet." He's trying to sound serious, but the ever present Dalton smirk gives him away.

Knox watches Charlie take a drag of his cigarette and remembers them lighting sticks off of each other, how it felt more intimate than any kiss ever could. The regret that has begun to follow him everywhere wells up once more, like a nasty bite wound.

Knox stays pretty quiet after that, listening to Neil and Charlie's sarcastic banter. It's as though they both can see straight through each other without ever having to drop their masks. He's jealous he can't read Charlie that way.

It's the weekend, they have nothing better to do but sit here and smoke and talk about nothing. And it's nice to do that, talk about nothing. Knox feels so as ease here, and can't help but think this is what he should have been doing with Charlie. Let it go slow, build off of moments like this. If they were alone, he'd find the perfect time to deliver a peck on the cheek or wrap his arms around Charlie's waist.

When Neil does eventually leave, Knox doesn't join him. He sits with Charlie in silence, just enjoying not being on edge together. Knox lays

his head on Charlie's bed and Charlie doesn't react. They just exist.

Existing is nice, Knox decides. Just because he can't confess the love that eats him from the inside out everyday, doesn't mean he can't exist with Charlie.

At some point, Cameron leaves the room to go to the bathroom. The moment they are alone, Knox tries to tell Charlie this.

"Charlie-" he starts, but the other boy cuts him off.

"Hush, Knox. I'm having a good time." And that's all Knox needs.

Maybe he can't let himself love a boy, especially not Charlie Dalton, but he can teeter on the edge of love. They can enjoy each other like this, team up for projects or talk to each other long past Welton's 'bed time.' And maybe one day there will be more, maybe he really really hopes it will be more, but until Knox can keep himself from fucking it up, this is how they will be.

Existing.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> Something bittersweet and short, to keep my juices flowing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The couple of days before summer break were slow. Finals were done, teachers were relaxed for the first time this year, and boys were buzzing about how anxious they were to get on with their vacations. It felt like one long weekend.

Knox and Charlie were hanging out on the dock, feet dangling in the water. Knox had rolled his pants up to his knees to keep them dry, but Charlie had no respect for uniform, letting his slacks get drenched.

“Your father will kill you if you ruin those.” Knox points out. Charlie smirks and splashes Knox. “Hey!” Knox is trying to sound angry, but the bright smile that Charlie always leaves on his face gives him away.

“Please,” Charlie remarks, “my father insists on buying me a new uniform every year. Something about ‘keeping up with appearances.’ Even though it looks the exact same as the year before’s.”

“Maybe you should wear an old uniform on the first day and see if he can tell the difference.” Knox jests.

It makes Charlie laugh, a beautiful sound that wraps around Knox like a blanket. “That’s a good one, I’ll have to try that.”

“Tell me how it goes.” Knox lets the quiet air sit for a moment, the Vermont air a bit too warm for his liking. “Listen,” Charlie turns his full attention to Knox, “my family is going to our lake house for the first couple weeks of summer. I was thinking I could ask my parents if you could join us?”

Charlie seems to contemplate it, seems to chew the offer up in his mouth and really taste it before swallowing. “Just me?”

The cool water his feet are submerged in isn’t enough to keep Knox from sweating all over at the question. “If you want! But I was thinking that we could invite Neil and Meeks, too. Maybe Pittsie?” He hadn’t thought of the other boys, if he was honest. The idea of him and Charlie basically alone in a lake house for two whole weeks made

Knox feel weak.

Charlie just smiles, and the look he gives Knox makes him worry the Dalton boy can read his mind. “Sorry, Knoxious. It does sound nice, but my father is taking us to Italy for the whole summer. You should invite the others, though.”

Knox feels his heart drop. “Oh,” he tries not to sound disappointed. “Maybe I will.” He won’t, he knows he won’t. “Italy, huh?”

“Yep.” Charlie pops the last letter like bubblegum.

“So, we’re probably not going to hear from you until next semester, huh?”

Charlie looks like he just now realized this. “I guess not.” His shoulders slump a bit, “But rest assured I’ll be having the time of my life.”

“I can’t wait to hear about it. I gotta say, I’m pretty jealous.”

Charlie responds, “Maybe I’ll write letters.” But he won’t, he knows he won’t.

Knox is cautious as he slowly grabs Charlie’s hand. He gives it as squeeze and Charlie squeezes back. They don’t pull their hands away. “It’s gonna be weird, not seeing you over summer. Does Neil know?”

Charlie shakes his head, “Haven’t told him yet. Was actually going to after this.”

“This?” Knox is confused.

“Hanging out with you.” He clarifies, “You know, I know this year has been weird for us, but it really is nice to hang out like this again.”

“Like friends?” Knox guesses. It’s weird to say, after everything ‘friends’ doesn’t seem to encapsulate the everything they are.

“Something like that,” Charlie smirks and Knox doesn’t have time to react before a kiss is being planted on his cheek.

“What was that for?” He doesn’t move away. It was nice.

“A goodbye kiss. You know, for my long journey.” It feels like more than a goodbye for the summer. Like Charlie is using it to tell Knox that being friends is all they can ever be. And Knox should be okay

with that. Should be.

“Of course,” Knox nods, “it could be a perilous trip. You need all the luck you can get.” He decides to do something daring. He grabs Charlie’s face and pulls it to his own. Charlie doesn’t pull away, and Knox takes the time to memorize every taste and feeling Charlie holds. Just in case.

Knox breaks first, leaning their foreheads against each other. “Enough good luck for you, slick?” Knox’s voice is barely above a whisper.

“Yeah,” Charlie whispers back, “I think so. Thanks.” Knox has a moment where he wants to tell Charlie to stay. To hide away in the Overstreet’s house all summer while his family has fun.

He pulls away before he says anything close to that. Instead, opting to say, “You, uh, should probably go tell Neil, right?”

“Yeah, Knox. Thank you for reminding me.” Charlie snaps back into that sarcastic persona he so casually wears.

Charlie pulls his his feet out of the water, drying them off and grabbing his shoes. “See you at dinner?”

Knox just nods, continuing to stare into the water. He listens as Charlie’s steps leave the dock.

Hopefully, the summer will go well. It will end in a few months and they’ll be back at Welton. Knox will be back to focusing on law school and grades and girls, Charlie will be back to focusing on chaos and fun.

Hopefully.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you for all the love!! I haven’t written in so long that this project has been scary, but the love I’ve been getting is really keeping me motivated

Summer Interlude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlie's summer was great.

He spends his days on the beach with his sister while his mom drinks the summer away and his dad treats the vacation like a work trip. They eat gelato and swim until their lungs hurt. It's nice getting to be around his sister without their parents.

He spends his nights in bars, surrounded by nameless men. No one asks his age, they just buy him drink after drink and offer him drugs. They take him to expensive hotels and homes, call him beautiful and make him a man.

He lets his hair grow out just enough for his father not to say anything. The men love it, speaking to him in their native tongue as their hands tangle in the black mess. Charlie eats up the attention.

Most of the time he pretends it's Knox he's sharing the night with. Sometimes to mix it up he imagines Meeks. Neither makes him feel better.

Charlie is good at pretending at happy. His sister asks him where he goes in the evenings and he makes up fun lies. He tells her he's going to find the best saxophone player in the country, or he's taking secret night classes to become a chocolatier.

She always rolls her eyes and waves him off. He just rustles her hair and apologizes that she'll never understand his mysterious ways.

The few dinners they do share as a family are done in silence. The longest they've all spent together without fighting.

His father gives him his saxophone on his birthday, and Charlie plays it obsessively. Music becomes his escape from this escape.

It may be the best summer Charlie has ever had.

Knox's summer was boring.

Days that should be spent swimming in the lake are instead spent with

his father breathing down his neck. His siblings get to play and relax while Knox helps Mr. Overstreet pour over cases, his father quizzing him.

He's told that when the lake vacation is up, he'll spend his time at the Overstreet law firm shadowing his father. Learning as much as he can. Exactly what every boy wants out of his summer.

Nights that should be spent sleeping peacefully are spent tossing and turning, worried about how his friends are doing. Mostly Charlie.

Charlie, away in another country with his family. Charlie, who is probably hooking up with anyone he can find. Charlie, who kissed him before the break, something Knox can't forget about.

Knox's summer anthem becomes his father's voice, droning on and on about expectations and how Knox is supposed to be the perfect son.

It should fill him with pride, the idea of being perfect. Instead, the thought fills him with dread.

The idea of fulfilling the life his father wants for him sounds like prison. Sitting in courtrooms and dinners with other lawyers. The perfect wife is an unobtainable goal that feels like it's always just out of reach. It's like every time he gets comfortable with the idea, those thoughts about Charlie creep back in.

They make him feel awful. The happiness Charlie makes him feel versus the everything he's been trained for. Two creatures in his chest gnawing to get out.

It may be the worst summer Knox has ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Summer is over, it's a new year. Todd is coming to town

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Todd's here now! Oh joy!

A new school year means new changes. Three main things stick out for Knox:

1. Charlie has grown a bit over the summer. He's still short, Knox will never let him forget that, but he is taller. It's nice. Cute.
2. Neil gets a new roommate. Todd is shy, awkward, but he's kind. If any person would be able to break open that shell, it'll be Neil. It's good they are roomed together.
3. Mr Keating. Full stop. All his talks about seizing the day makes Knox think about what's important in his life.
Charlie. Charlie is what's important to him. He makes a pact with himself to tell Charlie all those summer thoughts he had after the dinner his father set up for him. The Danberrys, some old friends of his father's. He's pretty sure Mr. Danberry is a Welton alumni. If thats true, Knox knows exactly how to talk to him.

He is a bit sad to miss the first study group of the year. Meeks and Pitts are working on a radio, and Knox has missed Charlie's dramatics when he can't figure out a problem.

The entire car ride over all he can think about is what he's gonna say to Charlie when he gets back. That he hasn't stopped thinking about him all summer. That Keating's attitude has seeped into him and he wants to tell their fathers to screw themselves.

And then Knox pulls up to the Danberry's. And then the door opens. And then the exact kind of girl his father has planned for him opens the door. And then it's over.

Knox knows what he has to do. And it's devastating, but it's what will make his life bearable and keep his father happy. He will date Chris Noel.

Her having a boyfriend is an obstacle, and maybe that's what draws Knox to her in the first place. She would be perfect, the girl his father has described time and time again, but he wouldn't be able to touch her. He could chase her forever and it wouldn't matter. Perfect for Knox and perfect for Mr. Overstreet.

When he tells his friends at study hall about how awful it is that he's met a girl, he can't help but look at Charlie the whole time. He's looking, longing for a reaction, but of course Charlie just has jokes to deflect.

"So about Chris…" Knox starts one night in the corner of the crowded common room.

"The love of your life?" Charlie responds, copying problems onto paper.

"Yeah, her." Knox hesitates. "What do you think?"

"Of what?" Charlie isn't looking up. Knox wishes he would look at him.

"Of me and her." Knox clarifies, "Of me chasing after her."

"I think it's stupid." Words that should sting instead cause an ounce of excitement to well up in Knox. Why did Charlie think it was stupid? Because they belonged together? Because Charlie saw through him like no one else and knew this wasn't what he wanted?

"It's not stupid." Knox retorts. "It's romantic."

"No, it's just stupid. There's nothing romantic about Chet Danberry sending you to an early grave." Charlie still isn't looking at him. It's making Knox anxious.

"He won't touch me. He's all talk."

"Have you seen him?" Finally the other boy looks at him, but Knox can't read the emotions painted on his face. Charlie has put that wall up again, the one Knox thought that he had finally broken down. Knox has half a mind to drag Neil away from his study session with Todd to ask what it means. "Guys like that don't care about love being 'written in the stars,' or whatever. Chris is hot. Chris is a cheerleader. This gives him status. And he's not going to give that up because some skinny kid from Welton claims to be in love with her."

That sick part of him he's been trying to exorcise hopes Charlie's right. "I know," he sighs, dramatically dropping into the chair by Charlie. "But she's perfect. Charlie, it's like heaven made her to my ideal." 'More like my dad's ideal.' But the difference is elementary at this point.

Charlie just rolls his eyes and gets back to work. Knox is worried he's hurt Charlie's feelings, and decides to stay quiet unless prompted. He watches Charlie more than he watches his homework. He watches the Dalton boy's eyes flicker from paper to across the room.

When Knox decides to follow his gaze, he sees Meeks and Pitts working on their radio- sorry, 'science project'- and a spike of jealousy assaults his senses. His teenage boy hormones tell him to go over and smash the radio into a million pieces. He fidgets with his hands hands instead, repeating in his head that he doesn't have a right to be jealous, that if he actually 'seized the day' like he planned instead of locking in on Chris, things would be different.

But they're not, and he has to live with that.

Time marches forward. Neil gets closer to Todd, Charlie gets closer to Meeks, and Knox writes poetry about a girl he wants through the lens of the boy his family sees him as.

Neil finds Keating's yearbook and makes the decision for everyone that they'll reform the Dead Poet's Society, against the Captain's warnings. Of course Charlie is first to hop on board, any idea Neil puts forward will always have his full support. And of course it takes Charlie mocking him to get Knox on board.

He has a secret thought, a whisper in his brain, the night of the first meeting. That he could use this space to write sonnets to Charlie and pass them off as works for Chris.

Charlie reads poetry that first night, and it's beautiful, even if it's hidden behind a crude joke. That's true about all of Charlie: something so beautiful hidden under layers of crude jokes. If you're willing to navigate them, you'll have a hard time not falling in love with him. Neil had, in the way best friends love each other more fiercely than any romantic partner could infringe on.

Knox had. In the way that he dreamed about Charlie. In the way that running away and disobeying his father had never occurred to him before. In the way that no one, not even Chris, had made Knox feel as much as Charlie has. In the way that he sees the walls Charlie has erected and wants to be the one to tear them down. In the way that he sees when Charlie gets angry and acts like a cornered wild dog, with raised hackles and growling and bared teeth barely hiding the fear that eats away at him underneath, and how he wants to be the one to soothe him in those moments.

Instead, he's typically the one that invoked that kind of reaction. Knox wishes he could vow to never hurt Charlie like that again, but he knows he will. He can't make his brain come to the conclusion his heart had come to on that roof. And every time he thinks he's there, that he can take that leap, the invisible chain around his throat tightens and he does the opposite.

He almost hopes he isn't misreading the body language between Charlie and Meeks. He knows it's hard to find like minded boys to Charlie. Even harder to find one's that are willing to take that chance.

If Meeks can give Charlie what Knox is too scared to, good. He won't lie and say he's not jealous. But he's happy. Charlie deserves some good, after all the bad Knox has given him.

Charlie got his saxophone over the summer, it seems. He brings it to a meeting, and uses it to amplify his poetry. He recites a poem that is genuine Dalton, no jokes or sarcasm. Knox watches Meeks watch Charlie, the smoke form his pipe curling around his glasses until Knox doesn't understand how he sees anything at all.

Then Charlie is playing at him, leg a centimeter away from being too close. And Knox is mesmerized, Charlie is keeping eye contact as he finishes his serenade. When he stops, Charlie leans a bit closer, his knee grazing Knox's leg, and Knox swears he's going to kiss him right here in front of all of the poets. But he just messes up Knox's hair.

And all that excitement that's been building in his chest bursts out with a confession for Chris, because god forbid he is actually genuine in his love for Charlie.

When he calls her, Charlie's breath is on his neck and he feels like he has to put on a performance of his devotion. He slumps against the wall when he hangs up so that he might add some distance between him and Charlie. This is who Knox chooses to be. A hopeless romantic reaching for a girl he can never have so he can continue to fool himself.

But she invited him to a party. And he said yes. He was so excited to see his friends excited for him, to prove to Charlie that he really does like girls, that he forgot to tell Chris a very important detail.

Knox has never been to a party.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

In honor of the ao3 outage being over, I bring two new chapters

It happened one night in the most them way it could. Meeks and Charlie sat in Meeks' dorm while the red head did everything he could to hammer Latin into the Dalton boy's head and Charlie just complained.

"You do know you need this class to graduate, right?" Meeks is getting annoyed, Charlie can see it on his face.

"I understand that, it doesn't mean I like it." Charlie is very good at poking the bear. He learned it from growing up with his father, it became his favorite game.

"You're going to be a banker."

Charlie groans and rolls his eyes, "Don't remind me."

"Do you realize that every piece of currency you'll be handling has Latin on it?"

"Then I'll just learn those phrases and I'll be good." Charlie is wearing his devilish grin like a mask.

"You're insufferable, Dalton." Meeks closes his textbook and stands to leave.

"Have I ever told you you're pretty when you're mad?" It makes Meeks blush immediately, pink creeping behind his freckles.

Meeks sits back down, defeated. "That's not funny."

"I wasn't joking." Charlie shrugs. Meeks ignores him, opening the textbook back up and scribbling furiously on his homework sheet. Charlie places a hand on his wrist to stop his writing, "I mean it. I wasn't joking." He reiterates. Meeks snatches his hand away and continues writing. "You're pretty. If we didn't go to Welton you'd have a new girlfriend every week."

Meeks pauses writing for a moment, but doesn't look away from the paper in front of him. "That's not really my thing." He comments.

“Right,” Charlie answers, “you’re way too loyal for that lifestyle. You’d find a girl on the first day and end up marrying her.”

Meeks looks sheepishly at him. “No, I mean,” he takes a shaky breath, “girls aren’t really my thing.”

“Oh?” Charlie leans forward in his chair, elbows propped up on his knees. “What is your thing? Someone like me?”

“Exactly.” Every visible inch of Meeks is bright red. Charlie wants to reach out and soothe his friend, hold him tight and tell him there’s no need to worry so much.

“Exactly?”

Finally, Meeks’ turns his face to gaze at Charlie. “Exactly. You are my ‘thing,’ Dalton. Can we get back to studying now?”

Charlie was stunned, mostly by the fact that Meeks was comfortable enough to tell him that. It made Charlie feel special, as he knew from experience the five stages of grief one goes through before confessing this. This thing they share, this wrong-wired attraction. “Suddenly, Latin is the least interesting thing in this room.”

“Latin has always been the least interesting thing to you.” Meeks goes to turn his head back to his paper, but Charlie gently catches his face in his hand, keeping the red head looking at him.

“And you’re the most.”

Meeks just lets out a nervous laugh, not pulling away. Charlie studies his face and the million little constellations that splatter it. This is nice. This is comfortable. This is more secure than Knox wants to give him.

He kisses Meeks, taking the laugh into himself and letting it wrap itself around his bones. Meeks holds tightly onto Charlie’s arm, like the Dalton boy might disappear if he wasn’t touching him.

They break apart lips, but keep foreheads pressed together, noses touching. “I’m in love with Knox.” It slips out. Part of him felt like he needed to say it, that he couldn’t pretend that all of his attention was on the boy in front of him.

“Oh,” Of course Meeks sounds upset, who wouldn’t be? Charlie moves his hand from the boys face to the back of his neck, keeping Meeks

from pulling back.

“You’re beautiful,” Charlie repeats, like that will fix it. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” But Meeks is avoiding eye contact.

“I need a distraction.”

That seems to get his attention, as the red head’s eyes shoot up from the ground. They explore Charlie’s eyes, then his lips. “Yes, sir,” he whispers.

Any words Charlie wants to say are lost in his friend’s mouth. His hand moves to that mess of curls and his fingers get lost in the hair. Meeks wastes no time in shoving hands into pants. He’s the same kind of desperate as Knox was.

“Meeks-“ Charlie pulls away for a moment. He feels awful, like he’s using his friend to get over the crush he has on a boy who has already chosen a bride. He supposes that is exactly what he’s doing.

“Shut up, Charlie.” So demanding. “Please?” That’s more like Meeks. Any form of protest is ripped out of him the moment the other boy rips into his shirt and starts scattering kisses and light bites across Charlie’s chest. Charlie helps him in shrugging his own shirt off, desperate to see how many constellations are hiding under there.

This, all of this, was perfect. Their kisses, entangling of limbs, clothes on the floor, all of it. It was different than Knox. Both experiences were desperate, but Meeks seems so sure in his movements. Charlie could tell from the first moment how much thinking Knox had to do anytime it came to them.

Knox’s thoughts were always so loud they permeated any interaction they had. Every kiss they shared, the moment lips connected that uncertainty would infect Charlie. Sometimes, even in the dark of his dorm, Charlie felt Knox’s shame creep into him. Like the other boy had infected him with that guilt from the moment their lips had first touched. Charlie didn’t get a choice in that.

It’s over as fast as it started, and all of a sudden they are laying on Meeks’ bed half-clothed with Meeks laying his head on Charlie’s chest. “I’m fine being a distraction.” He muses, “If it means we keep doing this.”

“You’re very good at it.” Charlie is playing with the other boy’s hair,

picking up curls and letting them spring back. “But it doesn’t seem fair.”

“Don’t tell me what’s fair to me, Dalton. I can decide that myself.” So Charlie shuts up, puzzled by this new found confidence.

Though he wants to lay here forever, in this comfortable moment, Charlie remembers something. Meeks has a roommate. “Where’s Pitts?”

Meeks tries to wave it off, but a glance at the clock on his desk seems to jolt him. He sits straight up, grabbing clothes off the floor and speeding to put them back on. “He’ll be back any minute.” He throws Charlie’s shirt at him and Charlie laughs.

“Calm down, freaking out is how you get people suspicious.” Charlie had to avoid enough angry wives in Italy to learn that fact. Meeks is running a hand through his hair to try and fix it. Charlie thinks it looks perfect as a mess.

He finishes buttoning his shirt right as Pitts opens the door. He glances to Meeks, who is fidgeting awkwardly in his desk chair, to Charlie, perched on Meeks’ bed with unruly hair. “Good study session?” He asks.

“You could say that,” Charlie stands up. “Would you look at the time. Meeks,” the red glances up in his direction, “same time next week?”

“Yes, sir.” Charlie could get drunk off that smile.

So it’s just a distraction. A temporary fix until Knox can figure himself out. And as long as Meeks knows that’s all it is, no one can get hurt.

Right?

Chapter 13

It's three in the morning and Knox is knocking frantically on Charlie's door. In his desperation, he forgets that other people are sleeping in this hall and while he can hope they won't wake up, he can't stop until Charlie answers.

The door swings open and luckily the figure in front of him belongs to Charlie instead of Cameron. The boys eyes are half open, he's in an undershirt and pajama pants and he's rocking major bed head. "Knox?" He croaks out. "What are doing? Do you know what time it is? You're lucky-" his eyes widen, "Is that blood?" Then he sniffs the air. "Have you been drinking?"

Charlie steps out into the hallways and closes his door so they don't disturb Cameron. "Yeah," Knox plays with the hem of his shirt, "I um, made a stupid mistake."

Charlie reach towards his face and Knox flinches. "At Chris's party?" Knox nods. Charlie looks around, grabbing Knox's hand when the coast is clear. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up." He starts to lead the Overstreet heir to the bathroom. Knox notices something red like paint on Charlie's cheeks.

"What's on your face?" He whispers, trying not to wake up the whole school.

"Hm?" Charlie looks back as they enter the bathroom, the bright lights really showing the red smears on his friend's face. "Oh, that. I also made a stupid mistake." He motions to the floor by the sinks. "Sit down."

Charlie grabs some paper towels and runs water over them. He kneels down by Knox and starts carefully wiping blood away. The pain makes tears involuntarily fill his eyes. "What was your mistake?" He's trying to distract from the throbbing of his face.

"You first," Charlie counters. He presses lightly on and around Knox's nose and it takes everything in him to keep still. "It's not broken, but you're going to have a wicked bruise tomorrow." Charlie announces.

"You're good at this," Knox comments as Charlie holds a cold paper towel to his face, a lame ice pack. "Helping people, I mean." Maybe Charlie should be a doctor instead of Neil.

Charlie shrugs, “I guess I was a bit of an adventurous kid. Got hurt all the time, had to help myself.” Knox gets a sense that’s not the whole story, but decides not to push. A tale for a different day.

“I kissed Chris.” Charlie puts more pressure on Knox’s nose and he jumps back in pain. “Ow! What the hell, Dalton?”

“Don’t move so much.”

“I didn’t! You-“ He remembers he’s the one in need of help and lets his argument die in his throat. “I was drunk.” He still was, if he was completely honest. Not entirely, Chet beating him sobered him up some, but he still felt light. His bones feel like jelly. “I kissed her forehead. That’s it, I swear. But these guys saw me and they told Chet and…”

“And he pummeled your face in. Like I told you would happen.” Charlie fills in the blanks and Knox just looks at him with what he hopes registers as a wordless apology. “Jesus, Knox. I should have offered to go with you. I could have at least taken some shots for you so you wouldn’t have been so wasted. And if you still decided to kiss Chris, I could have interfered before Chet got you to this point.” Charlie takes the paper towel away, Knox is sure he’s already bruising.

“I deserved it,” he replies, “I’ve been a jerk lately. It was like a wake up call.”

“Oh yeah?”

Knox nods. It gives him a jolt of hurt throughout his skull, which he’s sure shows on his face as Charlie is cradling his head again. “What was your mistake?”

“You should lay down. Give me your blazer,” Knox shucks it off and Charlie fashions it into a makeshift pillow on the ground, gently pushing on Knox’s chest so he’ll lay on the ground. Knox obliges, missing the warmth of the hand once it leaves him. It does make him feel better, especially once Charlie returns a new cold paper towel to his face.

“Thank you.” It comes out so quietly, and Charlie doesn’t react. Knox wonders if he really even said it.

“I, uh,” Charlie stutters out, “went to some college party. Met a couple of girls. Brought them to the cave.” He gestures to his face, “Did this with lipstick.”

“That’s lipstick?” Knox reaches up and swipes a thumb across Charlie’s face, letting the red smear more.

“Yeah, I stole it from one of the girls.” He reaches in his pajama pocket and pulls out a golden tube. “Call me Nuwanda.” It must be something from the meeting. Or maybe he’s made it up right now. Charlie has always been full of mysteries. “I also published a thing in the school paper. I credited it to the Dead Poets Society.”

“You what?” Knox tries to shoot up but the radiating pain and Charlie’s hand keep him pretty stationary. “Charlie, we’re gonna get in so much trouble.”

“Yeah,” he sighs, “I know that. Everyone else pointed it out. They were pretty pissed. Even Meeks didn’t want to look at me. I thought Neil was going to punch me.” He picks at the floor, “Like it told them, I’ll take all the credit. I’m fine getting in trouble, it doesn’t bother me.”

Knox knows it’s true. Sometimes he wonders if that’s all Charlie sees himself as: a scapegoat. Someone to take on everyone’s pain while he pretends to ignore his own. He wishes he could take some of responsibility off the other boy’s shoulders, wishes he could wave a wand and divide it equally between them.

They sit in the quiet for a bit, long past they’d be fine to go back to bed. Knox’s nose is no longer bleeding, and his head is starting to feel better. But they sit, enjoying the company, wanting to stretch out these private hours as much as they can.

“So,” Knox speaks first, “you and Meeks have been getting close.”

Charlie lets out a sound of frustration, “This again?”

“You’re right,” Knox immediately tries to take it back, “it’s really none of my business.”

Charlie seems to consider it before letting his shoulders drop. “Yeah. We’re not dating or anything. We just, you know, hook up sometimes.” He shifts to lay down on the cold hard floor. Their pinkie fingers are a centimeter from touching, too close and too far. “It’s a distraction more than anything.”

“A distraction? From what?”

“You know from what.” From Knox. From all the bullshit Knox has put

him through. Charlie needed a distraction, probably so he didn't strangle Knox. He can't blame him. Knox would hate himself too. Maybe he already does.

"Yeah. I'm sorry." He turns to look at Charlie's face, to study that smooth pale skin. "Tonight really put some things into perspective for me."

"Is this another one of your confessions?" He expected Charlie to be angry, but he just sounds tired. Like all of Knox's back and forth has taken a physical toll on him.

"Yeah," he admits sheepishly. "But also not. I don't want to get beat up again. You were right, chasing Chris was stupid. You're always right." Charlie laughs at that. "I was chasing her to run away from you. I'm scared, Charlie."

"I know, Knox. It's scary."

"But not as scary as losing you." Charlie looks at him, and Knox swears he can get lost in those eyes. "I want to be serious about this. This isn't just 'teenage hormones,' or whatever. I think about you. A lot. I spent my whole summer thinking about you."

"Knox," His voice has an edge to it, a warning.

"Please." Charlie plants a light kiss on Knox's lips and though it hurts he doesn't pull away.

"If it's not Chris, you'll find another girl to run after." Dalton says once he breaks the kiss.

"Please."

Charlie squeezes his hand. "I'd like that. Really." He runs a hand through Knox's hair. "But you're just going to break my heart again."

Knox kisses him again. Charlie leans into it. Every time he touches those lips he feels intoxicated, it's better than all that alcohol he downed tonight. He doesn't even know what they gave him, just that it burned. He should have never gone to that party.

They're both panting when they end the kiss, catching their breath. "I went and got those girls because I was mad at you." Charlie confesses.

“Oh?”

“I was so mad that you went to that party, I thought if I could prove I could get girls too it would show you… something. I don’t know, I was pretty drunk when I thought of it.” That he could make Charlie do something that impulsive makes his heart ache.

He’s holding Charlie’s face in his hand as they lay on the bathroom floor. The sun will come up soon and with it the other boys will come filing in here. And though Knox is aware of this, he doesn’t care. He just wants to sit here until he’s purged Charlie of the pain he’s caused him. “I know I keep messing up. This is what I want. Really. But if my dad found out, I’d be transferred and it wouldn’t matter. And I’ve been too terrified to take that risk. But the Captain, carpe diem, it’s got me thinking.”

“Me too.” Charlie’s tracing patterns into Knox’s arm. “Let’s not talk about it, okay? Can we just be together for now?” He looks like he might cry.

So Knox leaves it, learning that maybe not everything he’s thinking is worth saying. And maybe Charlie is right, maybe when they leave this faux sanctuary he’ll go right back to letting that fear drive his every action. But right now, in this moment, all that buzzing in his head stops. For whatever time they have left here, Knox can accept himself. He finds acceptance on Charlie’s lips, in his mouth, with his hands on the other boy’s hips, drawing their bodies closer. He lets Charlie’s name run through his veins and lets this night etch itself into his bones.

And it hurts, both the bruising on his face and the part of his brain he’s trying so hard to kill. But it’s real. The most real thing Knox Overstreet may ever experience in this lifetime.

Eventually, the sun does come up, and the opening of doors and mumbling of students is what it takes to peel them off of each other before they are found out.

Knox realizes he’s still in his clothes from the party. “I have to, um…”

“Go,” Charlie squeezes his hand, “I’ll check on you later. Get some rest.” Knox nods and slinks his way out of the bathroom. He manages to avoid detection by teachers, but some of the students give him strange looks.

When he makes it to his dorm, he rips off his button down and slacks

and quickly changes into pajamas. He could join the rest of the crowd for breakfast, but he fears if he doesn't get sleep now he'll collapse in the hallway. It is the weekend after all, he's allowed to sleep in.

The only thing keeping him from a restful sleep is the idea that once he closes his eyes, all of his courage will leave him. That when he wakes up, he'll be unable to face Charlie. But he promises to himself and prays to whatever God listens to boys like him and Charlie, that he can keep this up. That when the Dalton boy checks on him their night won't be erased.

That just for a little bit, he can hold happiness in his hand and know peace. Chris doesn't want him, and Knox doesn't want her, so it shouldn't be too hard.

But then, Knox has always been good at complicating things.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> I really struggled with this chapter and did not proofread it. Hopefully it came out well!

He's woken up by someone gently shaking him. Knox isn't entirely sure Charlie's wrong about his nose not being broken, as even the slight jostle makes him feel like Chet was pummeling him all over again. "Knoxious," a familiar voice makes his open his eyes and gaze upon Charlie.

Light streams in from the window, shining across Charlie's eyes and making them turn a gorgeous amber. He sits up, wasting no time to kiss the other boy. It's short, like a good morning. It feels natural, it feels right, it feels like everything Knox has been trying to purge inside of him.

The kiss leaves Charlie with a goofy smile on his face, something infectious and beautiful. Knox can't help but smile as well. "What's up?" He finally asks.

The question immediately makes Charlie's smile fade. "The papers are out. Nolan called an assembly in the chapel."

"Oh." Knox feels his stomach drop. A school assembly means either all of the poets get in trouble, or worse: just Charlie.

"How's your face doing?" Of course Charlie is trying to distract. It has always been his style.

"I'm fine," he lies, "we should head to the assembly. You know, so we don't get in trouble."

"We'd be in trouble either way." Charlie points out. He plants a kiss on Knox's forehead, presumably just because he can. "But you're right. Throw on your uniform, apparently there's a dress code for this thing."

He sounds so casual about it, like they aren't about to march their demise. "I'll meet you out there."

Charlie doesn't leave, opting to sit on Knox's roommate's bed. "What, no show? I could be suspended, Knoxie. I think I deserve something

nice beforehand." Knox rolls his eyes, but can't keep himself from smiling. This is nice, even if it's a preamble to something awful.

He awkwardly shucks his sleep shirt off while Charlie watches, and it's so casual. If they weren't on a time crunch, he'd lay down on the bed with Charlie and waste the rest of the weekend away. Lock the door and mark each other as their own.

"My eyes are up here, Ace." Knox jests, taking Charlie's chin in his hand and forcing him to stop staring at his chest. And then the most amazing thing happens.

Charlie Dalton blushes. Pink spreads across his cheeks and Charlie is blushing. "Oh my god," Knox laughs out, "I actually made Charlie Dalton blush."

Charlie bats his hand away and looks to the wall. "No you didn't! It's just the light."

Knox is full on laughing while he tried to button up his shirt. "This is a huge honor." Charlie chucks a pillow at him as Knox shucks off his sleep pants. It causes him the stumble back in surprise, but doesn't stop his delight. He pulls his slacks and shoes from the wardrobe.

He pulls on his blazer and crosses the room to Charlie, who's still pouting. "Aw come on, it's cute." He kisses Charlie's nose and the Dalton boy doesn't push him away. Knox moves to his lips and Charlie pulls him on top of him on the tiny bed.

In true teenage boy fashion, they are unable to keep their hands to themselves, even at a time like this. One sharp knock on the door is what it takes to stop them from having to redo the whole getting dressed process. "C'mon, Knox," Meek's voice, "kids are already heading to the chapel, we've gotta go."

Knox gets up and smoothes his blazer, like he's trying to wipe traces of Charlie off of him before anyone can see. "Coming!" He calls. Charlie hops up off the bed to join him. "Ready?"

"Always." And they make their way to the assembly.

It goes about as poorly as Knox had imagined. No, worse, because Charlie had to make a big joke in front of everyone. He's sent to Nolan's office, of course, and it leaves the poets terrified.

Most of the boys are worried about the club. Neil and Pitts whisper

about how this is it for them, no more sneaking out, no more freedom from the place that squashes all signs of individuality.

But Knox is biting his nails thinking about what's happening to Charlie. "We should have all stepped forward." He muses out loud.

"And then what?" Meeks answers, "Charlie would still be getting the paddle, it would just be after the rest of us did." He's pacing, and Knox can tell he's just as worried about Charlie as Knox is. "And then we'd all get a call home, and that's a whole other mess."

"But he's still getting all of that!" Knox argues. "And his father…" he trails off, shivering at the very thought of Mr. Dalton.

Meeks nods thoughtfully. "His dad is intense. But I'm sure Charlie will get out of that somehow. He's very crafty." They both smile thinking about it, about Charlie's charm. It had drawn them both in, and though they couldn't talk about it here, this shared connection turned attraction they both had for Charlie gave them some kind of link. He wondered what, if anything, Meeks knew about the night before.

Overlapping chatter dies down as Charlie rounds the corner, very obviously trying to hide a limp. Knox ignores the instinct to meet him, knowing this would be a job for Neil. Though, Charlie seems to even give his best friend the cold shoulder, keeping his head down.

When he does turn, and Knox sees those tears Charlie's been trying to hide, he wants so desperately to hold him tight and not let go. But Charlie closes the door in their faces. A physical barrier between him and the world.

Cameron ends up on outside. "We share that room," he complains, "he can't just lock me out."

"Jesus, Cameron." Neil is the first to jump to his defense, naturally. "Can you just give him a minute?"

"Why should my grades suffer because Dalton fucked up?" Knox watches Neil's eyes flash dark with anger, watches as he balls and unballs his fist like he's weighing the consequences of laying Cameron out. Then watches as Todd places a hand on Neil's shoulder, seemingly dissipating any irritation he may have held.

"You can borrow my books if you need to study that bad." Neil bargains, "Just give him some time, okay?"

Cameron rolls his eyes and seems to accept that answer, if with some obvious annoyance. Knox waits until everyone has dispersed, either disappearing back into dorms or heading outside to blow off some steam with a few rounds of soccer.

Knox peers out of his own doorway, checking three times that no one is around before striding over to Charlie and Cameron's door. He contemplates knocking, but knows he'll just be sent away. So he chooses to ask forgiveness over permission and opens the door.

There he finds a deflated Charlie curled in on himself. Knox hears a sniffle, and makes sure to close the door behind him with a little force to announce his presence. He watches Charlie quickly wipe tears away before turning his body to face the intruder. "Knox?" He croaks out.

Knox makes his way to Charlie's bed, letting him scoot out of the way so Knox may sit down. "How are you?" Knox fights to urge the brush back Charlie's hair, picking at the Welton-issued bedsheets instead.

"Just dandy." Charlie's giving Knox that tight-lipped smile. "Look, you can tell the others I'm not gonna rat anyone out. I told Nolan it was all me, and I'm going to continue to tell him that until he drops it."

"I wasn't really worried about that." Knox admits.

"Then why are you here?" There are those hackles again, Charlie's built in defense system. Everything about his body language screams 'go away, leave me in my misery,' but Knox doesn't budge.

He doesn't know if he's trying to prove something to himself or to Charlie by staying. "I'm worried about you." A simple enough answer.

"Oh," It is almost as though the words disorient Charlie, caught off guard when presented with the reality that someone might actually care about him.

"Is Mr. Nolan going to call your father?"

Charlie shrugs. "Maybe. He said he'd deliberate on it, but would prefer to 'handle this internally,' whatever that means."

"I think it means he doesn't want to invoke the wrath of Mr. Dalton." Charlie gives him a a half smile, and Knox can't help himself. He pulls the other boy into a tight hug.

And they lay there, just hugging on Charlie's bed. Knox presses a hard

kiss into Charlie's neck.

He swear he hears the Dalton boy mumble something akin to 'I love you' into his chest, but he can't be sure. So he doesn't say anything. Instead, he chooses to let the implications eat him alive.

He tries to pull away and Charlie holds him tighter. "Stay. Please." He sounds like a little kid, scared and lost, holding onto the only safety they can find.

He does stay, if only for a little while. When he does leave, he stutters out some excuse about having homework to catch up on. He doesn't, Knox is very good about staying on top of work, but he can't lay there anymore.

Maybe it's the uncomfortable feeling he gets seeing Charlie like this. Maybe it's the fact that comforting Charlie is a Neil job, and Knox feels like he's playing a role he's not made for.

Maybe it's knowing that when his father hears about the phone call from God- and he will, Mr. Overstreet knows everything that happens at Welton- he will ask Knox to stop hanging around Charlie, and if he leaves now that will be easier for him.

The other poets swarm him as soon as they see him in the hallway. Knox tells them Charlie is fine, because he knows that's what Charlie would want him to say. Cameron asks if can go back in his dorm. Knox just shrugs.

Part of him is angry at Charlie for getting in trouble. If he could just behave, Knox wouldn't have to worry about his father's disapproval of their friendship.

But then he wouldn't be Charlie.

Dalton doesn't show up to dinner, but is waiting in the common room when the other boys pile in for their nightly study session. He draws a crowd, naturally, Meeks standing right beside him as he recounts the events of Nolan's office.

It's quite a show.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just as he predicated, the phone call came. A couple weeks after the incident, Knox was motioned out of his study hall by Nolan. It made his body immediately flood with anxiety. Charlie gives him a subtle touch as he stands, ghosts of fingers across Knox's palm. Knox ignores it, pretending he didn't feel anything at all. After all, if this is the call he has been predicting, he can no longer entertain Charlie in that way.

The walk to the phones was excruciating, each step filling his throat with more and more bile. Knox swears he's going to vomit all over Principal Nolan by the time they get there. The cold of the phone's receiver makes him jolt a bit when it touches his ear. He waits for Nolan to walk off before speaking.

"H-hello?" He stutters out, like he's talking to a stranger instead of his father.

"Knox, hello. I was just calling to check in. We haven't had you home in a while, and you know how your mother gets." Mr. Overstreet's voice is level, collected. He's speaking to Knox with the same cadence he would use for a client.

Knox lets out a nervous chuckle, "Yes, sir. You can tell her is well. Good grades, tons of studying, wonderful friends. I have been a little homesick, but I can wait until break." He can wait until break, or long after it. The longer he stays away from home the better.

"I'm so glad you mentioned your friends, there's one in particular I was hoping to talk to you about." There it is. "I heard about the Dalton's son's outburst at the assembly a couple of weeks ago."

Knox pretends to think on it, "hm, outburst? Oh, that. Charlie was just having some fun." He tries to downplay it, "But I promise he learned his lesson."

"I've also heard," his father continues, "you two have been spending a lot of time together. You know I don't think he is a good influence for you, Knox." His father wants to say that he knows about Charlie, that someone somewhere told him that Charlie likes boys and Knox can't be hanging around that.

“Charlie’s a fine influence.” Knox counters, “He’s just a little… eccentric at times.”

“Please don’t argue with me, Knox.”

“I mean it! He gets good grades, he’s an amazing rower, he just gets sidetracked sometimes. Wouldn’t you rather I be around him to keep him out of trouble?” He’s bargaining, hoping he can appeal to his father’s logical side.

No luck. “This isn’t up for debate. Any interaction outside of an academic sense with Charles Dalton is strictly prohibited. Do you understand, Knox?” Knox has only made it worse, maybe he’s not cut out to be a lawyer.

“But, sir, he’s my friend.” He knows he sounds like a little kid, but he doesn’t know what else to say.

Obviously he can’t tell his father about these past two weeks, about him learning every freckle and scar that litters Charlie’s body. He can’t tell him about the nights they just lay in bed making each other laugh until one of them leaves. He can’t tell him about the raw, unfiltered love he is experiencing.

He hears his fathers tsk of disapproval. “I didn’t send you to Welton to make friends, I sent you there to get ahead.”

“I know, sir.” Knox sighs. Then, an idea. “Actually, I met a girl when I was at the Danberry’s. Do you know Chris Noel?”

Mr. Overstreet is quiet for a moment before responding. “Isn’t she their son’s girlfriend?”

“Yes, sir.” Knox feels his face heat up.

“You know,” his father laments, “your mother was engaged when I met her.”

“Really?” Knox did know this, his father has told the story a million times.

“Oh yes.” A slight chuckle comes from the phone. “As long as your grades don’t suffer, there’s no harm in chasing a lady.”

A very different attitude than when speaking about Charlie. He wonders what Mr. Overstreet would say if Knox let himself go against

his genes and be honest.

“I promise, father. I won’t let you down.”

“I know, son.” The line goes dead. Knox hangs the phone back in the receiver maybe a bit too hard. He makes the trudge back to the common room, head racing.

He avoids looking at Charlie when he enters the room, but can feel those eyes burning into him. Knox takes a seat beside Cameron.

Time ticks slowly. Cameron talks and talks about nothing, or maybe it’s chemistry. Knox can’t make himself pay attention. When boys do start leaving, Knox gathers his books as quickly as he can. He tries to slip out in the crowd, but a tight hand around his arm pulls him back and suddenly he’s face to face with Charlie.

Charlie stares at Knox intensely as the last of the boys walk out of the room. When the door closes, he finally lets go. “Are you okay, Knoxie?” His voice is laced with worry, and Knox considers for a moment not going through with it.

But he must. His father has eyes on him at all times, and Knox can’t take any risks. “My dad called.”

“Yeah, I thought so.” Charlie says, “What did he want?” He laces their fingers together, trying to calm Knox.

“We can’t keep doing this.” Knox takes the opportunity the shock gives him to untangle their hands.

“What do you mean?” Charlie’s eyes are searching his face, looking for the humor in the situation.

“My dad heard about your phone call stunt. He doesn’t want me being friends with you anymore.” Maybe if he’s blunt, this will be over quicker.

No luck. Charlie’s touching on his chest and looking at him like if Knox takes it back right now, he’ll make it worth his while. “I’d say we’re a little more than friends, Knoxious.”

It takes everything in him to pull away, but he does. “Stop, Charlie. What did you think would happen?”

“It was a joke, Knox.” And then, as though the situation has fully sunk

in, “I’m sorry. Please don’t do this.” He’s begging. It’s awful, Knox wants to take it all back.

But he won’t. “This was a bad idea.”

“What do you mean?” Charlie has tears brimming in his eyes.

“All of this. Us. It can’t work.” He thinks about leaving right now, but something keeps him rooted in place.

“We can be more discreet.” Charlie’s bargaining now, speed running stages of grief.

Knox shakes his head. “This isn’t up for debate.” Oh God he sounds just like his father. “I can’t. We can’t.” He takes a step toward the door.

He feels Charlie lay a hand on his shoulder. “Knox, wait-“

“What’s your plan?” It explodes out of chest like a bomb. “Huh? We’re going to lay low here in Welton for our last two years, fucking in bathrooms and pretending like a real couple? What about after we graduate? You don’t really think we have any chance outside of these walls, do you?” Knox sounds like his father.

Charlie is crying now. It’s a painful sight. “I don’t know.” He takes his hand back, defeated. “I knew we were on borrowed time, I just didn’t think it’d be over so quickly.”

“Yeah, well,” Knox shrugs, like this is the most casual thing in the world.

“I love you.” Charlie says it like a whisper, but it booms in Knox’s ears. It seems to fill the whole room. And he knows this is Charlie’s last attempt, he’s being baited.

And maybe in another lifetime it would work. In another lifetime, they are wrapped in each other’s arm and nothing matters. He would kiss Charlie and tell him this is all a joke.

In this lifetime, he has a responsibility to his father. “Goodnight, Charlie.”

And he walks out.

He makes a plan in his room that night, staring up at the ceiling and listening to the soft snores of his roommate. He’ll write Chris a poem.

Do something stupid and go to her school. Maybe get her flowers. Really prove that someone like her is who he wants.

The other poets are on board, of course, all the romantics. Charlie doesn't say much to Knox directly, but gets excited for him to the group at large. He's a performer at heart, and he isn't going to let Knox see him slip up.

In fact, when Knox does go to Chris's school, embarrassing her in front of all of her friends, Charlie is the first to congratulate him and ask questions. Meeks is close behind.

Mr. Dalton never finds out about his son's disruption. Or maybe he does and Charlie just doesn't tell anyone. Keeping secrets is Dalton's specialty, Knox knows that now.

No one will know of their weeks of love. Their short stint of whispered confessions and hands all over. They will become a blip in time as a couple. They will stay friends to keep up appearances, but they will hold in their heart that euphoria they gave each other.

Every minute Knox spends fawning over Chris is another minute apart from Charlie. It tears at his soul, a rabid creature leaving wounds all over. And he would try to kill it, but the pain serves as a reminder of his mistakes. He must live with it.

Chapter End Notes

One day I'll learn to write not angst, but for now, enjoy

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> I listened to a lot of James Marriott while writing this so everyone say thank you James

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox left him alone in that room, alone to the bear the weight of his grief. He sits there, letting it consume him for a long time. Long enough he wonders if anyone is going to come looking for him.

Then he remembers: they never do. He could sit here until the sunrise, he could sleep here, and no one would bother to find him until they needed something from the room.

It all gets too much. The missing Knox, the feeling abandoned, the shame that comes with this affliction he has. Charlie decides to do what he always does when he gets overwhelmed.

He'll go to the roof. He's wearing his undershirt and jeans and will probably freeze to death, but the idea of stopping by his dorm and exchanging pleasantries with Cameron just to get his coat sounds like absolute torture. He wipes away the last of his tears and stands. He opens the door, and there stands a familiar face.

Meeks. Of course he'd be here when Charlie is at his lowest.

"Charlie?" Meeks' recognition snaps Charlie into performance mode. He leans against the doorway, smiling down at the other boy.

"Hey, Meeksie. Fancy seeing you here." He lets his patented Dalton smirk paint his face.

Meeks reaches towards his face, Charlie catches his hand before it can feel dried tears. "Have you been crying?"

Charlie lets go of the hand and shrugs. "Nah, my eyes are probably just red from smoke." Hopefully Meeks is too focused on Charlie to notice there's not even the lingering smell of cigarettes in the room. "What are you doing back here? Don't you and Pitts have some electrical abomination to work on in the secret of the night?" He wiggles his fingers to accentuate his last point.

“I, uh, forgot some books. Are you sure you’re okay?” His eyes are searching Charlie’s.

“Don’t worry about me, Meeksie.” For good measure he roughs up Meeks’ hair. “I was gonna head to roof.” Strange, he never tells people when he plans to disappear.

“Want company?”

Charlie thinks on it for a moment before nodding. “That would be nice.”

“We should grab jackets first, right?” Charlie can see Cameron’s face now, judging him. “It’s freezing out there.”

Charlie places a hand lightly on Meeks’ hip. “I think we’ll keep each other warm just fine, don’t you?” It makes Meeks blush, but then, it’s very easy to make Meeks blush. More importantly, it makes Meeks glance down at the ground to hide his blush, finally taking his burning eyes off of Charlie.

“Y-yeah, I think that can work.” Meeks’ stuttering makes Charlie giggle.

“Good, let’s go.” He takes a step into the hall.

“Wait!” Meeks interrupts, “I still have to grab my books.”

Charlie waves a dismissive hand. “You can grab them in the morning.”

“I at least have to tell Pitts where I’m going, he’s going to think I got kidnapped.” Meeks is worrying his lips with his teeth and Charlie is trying not to stare.

“If you don’t want to come, I can entertain myself.” Charlie knows he’s being a tease, but the only other option is to breakdown and tell Meeks everything. And if he does that, if Meeks knows what happened with Knox, he’d be mixing two worlds he’s worked so hard to keep separate.

“No, sir. I mean, yes, sir! I mean-“ Meeks sighs, “I’m coming.”

“Good.” He grabs Meeks’ hand and leads him to the bathroom, the nearest window without going to the dorms. Charlie starts his climb up, going slower than normal to keep up with Meeks’ pace.

In the end, he has to help pull the scholar up the last foot. Meeks is

panting when he finally plops down beside Charlie. “Do you do this often?” He manages to get out once his breathing regulates.

Charlie is having to keep back a fit of laughter, seeing his friend have such a hard time climbing. “Just when things get intense, you know? Welton isn’t exactly stress free.”

Meeks lays his head on Charlie’s shoulder, his curls tickling Charlie’s neck. “Yeah, I get that.” Charlie wants to sit in silence for the evening. Being around Meeks feels like how home should feel, comfortable and safe and warm. If he can channel that, really take it in, maybe he won’t have to think about Knox. “Why are you up here tonight? What’s intense?” Fuck.

He taps the rooftop nervously. “Well,” he starts, “Knox told me he doesn’t want to entertain me anymore.” It was a crude way of putting it, but if he had to recite the argument, he’d be a blubbering mess.

Meeks intertwines their fingers, “I’d be happy to entertain you.” He whispers it, like it needs to be a secret even when it’s just them. Charlie supposes you can never be too safe with these things.

He doesn’t answer, just presses a kiss into Meeks’ curls, taking in the scent of his shampoo. Meeks starts to shiver a bit and Charlie wraps an arm around him.

“Aren’t you cold?” Meeks asks through chattering teeth. Charlie doesn’t answer.

He’s not cold. He’s not anything, really. He’s amazed he’s able to hear Meeks at all while his mind is trying to escape, to slip into a comfortable numb.

“What happened with Knox?” Meeks tries again to stir up conversation.

“I told you.” He hopes Meeks can’t feel him tense up.

“No, I mean,” Meeks is obviously trying to be careful with his words, “what exactly did he say?”

Charlie doesn’t want to talk about this. So he doesn’t, choosing instead to turn and softly places a hand on Meeks’ jaw. “Hush.” He whispers.

And Meeks does, because he’ll take Charlie wherever he can get him.

When kisses turn into Charlie's shirt being pulled off turn into Meeks biting bruises into Charlie's chest, Charlie lets his mind wander.

This is what he should want. Meeks is soft and kind and treats Charlie like the most precious thing in the world. He wants what best for Charlie, even if that's not him.

But Knox is like him. Broken attracts broken. If they can be broken pieces together, maybe they'll make one whole person. Even if it takes Knox a while to get there.

He think about what Knox said while Meeks makes gorgeous sounds underneath him. About what happens after Welton, about how boys like them won't survive out there. Knox was right, what was the plan?

He's not doing this to make Knox jealous, he knows he would never win in that fight. Knox can flaunt Chris around and everything Charlie does has to stay hidden, just like this. He never had a chance. No, he does this because it's what's right. Being here, letting Meeks claw down his back is right. It's as close to normal as Charlie has ever had. Maybe as close as he'll ever get.

Suddenly Meeks is laying beside him, shirtless and sweating. "Not cold anymore, huh?" Charlie teases.

Meeks just takes Charlie's hand in his, letting out a soft laugh in between panting.

Charlie clears his throat and squeezes the other boys hand. "What happens after Welton?"

"Come on, Charlie." Meeks sounds like he's talking to a child. "You know the answer to that. Our fathers will find us wives, hopefully ones that don't mind our extracurricular activities, and we blend in."

"Oh." Meeks has obviously thought about this. Is Charlie the only one who hadn't?

"Yeah." Meeks rolls over and lays his head on Charlie's chest, head landing on one of the masterful bruises he crafted. "But we'll still be around each other. I'll invite you and your lady over every holiday." He looks up into Charlie's eyes, "You know, granted you don't get expelled before then and I'm still allowed to talk to you."

"You don't have to worry about that. Knox and I are legacies, we're untouchable. Trust me, I've tried. It would take something huge to get

me kicked out of Welton." Something, he muses to himself, like fucking boys on the roof.

"Well, stop trying. One of these days you won't be so lucky." Meeks scolds. "And I can't survive Hellton without you."

"I'll try, but I can't control when mischief beckons." Meeks gives him a slight shove.

"Come on, let's get to bed." Meeks says, apparently tired of freezing together. "I don't want to catch hypothermia, even if I'm doing it with you."

"No fun." Charlie jests. They throw their clothes back on, Meeks carefully climbs down after Charlie, so that Charlie may catch him if he falls.

"You know," Meeks muses once they are in the bathroom. "If Nolan let me do rowing like I asked, I bet I could outclimb you."

"Luckily we don't live in that world, and I still get to help you out." Charlie beams. He kisses Meeks' forehead. "Let's go to bed." Then, before they can take a step, "Thank you."

"For?"

"Everything. You help me. You make me happy. Thank you."

Meeks looks like he wants to say something, but settles on a smile and nod before he heads to his dorm. Charlie lets him get a head start before going to his own dorm. Cameron is reading and pays him no mind.

Knox does flaunt Chris. He goes to her school with flowers and a poem and confesses his love for her in a way he never would for Charlie. And Charlie is right there to hype him up.

It eats at him and every bite of food he takes around Knox feels like swallowing tacks. He swears Knox stares directly at him every time he talks about Chris.

It's hard to hate someone you've never met, but Charlie does. He hates Chris. And after many long nights with Meeks he realizes it has nothing to do with Knox choosing her.

It's because she is the smart choice, the obvious choice. Because Knox

will never have to worry about consequences when it comes to her or any other girl. Knox chose safety over happiness. It sounds like Meeks will too, when the time comes.

And Charlie will be left alone.

Chapter End Notes

> I do start school tomorrow and will try my best to keep uploading frequently, but if I'm gone for a week just know I will be back! I have this entire fic planned out, and I hope that you enjoy what I have so far!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> It's been a week, I definitely owe y'all a chapter!! I hope you enjoy!
>
> I should also say I havent betaed this

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil's play is tonight. A perfect distraction from the dread that has been building in his body since his conversation- rather, fight- with Knox. He's done wonderful at playing nice, so wonderful even he's convinced he is no longer mad at Knox.

When he does his "getting red bit," he feels Meeks' eyes follow him out of the bathroom. His little chuckle is music to Charlie's ears, filling him with pride. With Knox in front of him and Meeks behind, the boys make their way to meet Keating. Charlie is giddy, the idea of Neil finally getting on stage is enough to keep a goofy smile on his face.

"You look ridiculous," Knox mocks. "'Drive girls crazy?' Really Charlie, it's no girl's wet dream to get with a guy who still plays with paint."

Charlie playfully slaps him, "Like you know what girls want."

"Yeah, how's it going with Chris?" Cameron chimes in. Todd snickers.

As though saying her name has a magical effect, Chris is standing there. In the hallway. In Welton.

Charlie feels a lump form in his throat. Knox looks at him, and his 'deer in the headlights' expression matches Charlie's face, he's sure. He watches Knox walk towards her, and he motions the other poets away from the scene.

Meeks stays behind for a moment too long, staring. Charlie yanks him, unwilling to let Meeks also get sucked in by her.

"She's pretty." Meeks comments once they're out of earshot.

"Yeah," Pitts agrees, "what's she doing here?"

Charlie feels unease creep through his bones. Meeks thinks she's pretty. Will he leave too? "Your suit is too big for you, Meeks." He says, trying to change the subject. It's true, the suit jacket combined with the Welton issued coat makes Meeks look like he's being swallowed. Charlie doesn't mention that he thinks it's adorable.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. It was my dad's." He replies sheepishly, "He thought I'd grow into it." Meeks shrugs, seemingly unbothered by Dalton's off-the-cuff remark.

"Can't believe Knox's stalking actually worked." Cameron mumbles.

"Maybe you drew your symbol wrong and passed your 'virility' onto Knox." Pitts jests.

"I know how to draw, Pittsie." As if that's what Charlie has a problem with. "Let's just go, I want a good seat."

"But Knox-"

"It's fine." Charlie cuts off Meeks. "I'm not missing a minute of the play because Knox wants to flirt."

He leads the other poets out of the door and into the biting cold. He tries not to make a face when Knox insists on walking with Chris.

Meeks' hand finds Charlie's thigh in the dark back seat. Charlie doesn't react, scared that any word, movement, breath, might mean the pressure disappears.

They sit next to each other in the theater. Charlie tries not to focus on the fact he doesn't see Knox. Tries not to get angry that Knox is letting Chris be more important than the poets once again.

Neil is good, wonderful in fact. He's always had that kind of presence, ever since they were kids. Charlie remembers playing pretend with Neil, being captivated by his best friend's scenarios. He's captivated now, watching Neil's energy fill the stage.

He's so captivated, in fact, he almost doesn't notice Meeks lace their hands together, feeling safe to do so in a dark, crowded theater. Charlie squeezes back, but refuses to take his eyes off the stage. In this moment, Neil is the only thing that matters. His joy is seeping into Charlie from the stage.

When the play ends, and the boys yawp, they flood the hallways

hoping to grab Neil first. Todd pushes in front of them all.

Charlie makes eye contact with Knox, who's holding Chris's hand. He tries not to think too hard about it.

Mr. Perry pulls his son away before any of his friends have a chance to say anything. Charlie tries to do what he does best, put the attention on him so that others aren't punished as harshly. But Mr. Keating pulls him back and echoes the words that Charlie has heard one too many times in his life: Don't make it worse than it is.

It doesn't feel right, watching Neil drive away. Something feels cold in Charlie's bones, and it's not just the snow.

"Hey," Meeks whispering in his ear brings Charlie back down. "Let's head to the cave. Get our minds off of it." Charlie nods, looking at the other poets.

"Boys, up for an impromptu meeting?" They all nod and excitedly whisper to themselves. Knox promises to join in a bit, he has to talk to Chris first. Of course.

They get approval from their Captain and start their journey. Pittsie and Todd take up the front, Cameron close behind. Meeks and Charlie are walking a good yard behind the other boys, hands brushing every once in a while but never fully connecting.

"Are you okay?" It seems Meeks notices Charlie's silence.

"Yeah."

"Is it about Knox?" Charlie looks at Meeks, looks at those big eyes blinking owlishly at him.

"No," it's a half lie. Knox is on his mind, but it's not the main issue. "It's Neil. I'm worried about him."

"He's okay," Meeks reassures him. "He's home. It's the safest place for him, even with his father."

"I don't know." Something was different. The look in Mr. Perry's eyes mimicked his own father right before Mr. Dalton would strike him.

Meeks stops and grabs Charlie's arm, forcing him to also hang back. Meeks waits until the others are just out of sight before speaking. "He'll be okay," he reiterates, "what about you? What do you need?"

“I don’t know.” Charlie says again. He’s trying not to spiral. Then after a moment, “To not think about it.”

Meeks nods. “You know, your symbol doesn’t just drive girls crazy.” He’s tracing Charlie’s chest where the lightning bolt would be.

Charlie just laughs and grabs Meeks’ hands. He places a gentle kiss to the knuckles. “Not that kind of distraction, it’s too cold out.”

“Sorry,” Meeks apologizes, and despite the cold outside, Charlie feels heat radiate from Meeks hands as a full body blush overtakes the boy.

“It’s alright,” Charlie smiles down at him. “I just want to talk.”

“About?”

“Anything, really.” He takes a seat in the snow and pats beside him as an invitation. Meeks takes it, and Charlie wraps his arm around the smaller boy and pulls him in. They sit in silence for a moment, until Charlie decides to break the building tension inside of him. “How long have you known?”

“Known what?” Meeks is looking up at him. Snowflakes decorate his red curls, and the cold is dancing around his glasses causing small fog spots.

“That you, you know. Were…” He’s having a hard time wording it, because he doesn’t know the word for it. Every word he’s heard used for boys like them came from his father’s mouth, and he always spat them with such hatred and contempt that Charlie couldn’t believe they were right. The way he felt with Meeks or Knox was too comfortable, too beautiful to be connected to those words.

“Charlie?” Meeks is still looking at him, waiting for the end of the question.

“How long have you known you don’t like girls?” It’s the only way he can say it, even if it sounds awkward.

“How long have I known you?” Meeks ponders.

“Since 6th grade.” Charlie provides.

“Then since 6th grade.” Charlie sits in stunned silence, so Meeks continues, “Actually, 7th grade. You were a real dick that first year.”

Charlie laughs and shoves Meeks a little too hard. The redhead has to

catch himself before he lands in the snow, but he's smiling.

"Why did you never say anything to me?" Charlie's trying not to be all serious, it's not who he is, but he can't help it.

Meeks shrugs. He seems to think on his answer before stating an anecdote. "I used to have this aunt. Aunt Diana."

"Used to?" Charlie interrupts. Meeks gives him a look and Charlie raises hands in apology.

"She had this friend. In the way that you and I are friends. Or you and Knox are friends. Or Todd and Neil-"

"I get it, Meeks." Then, like he just heard that last part, "Wait, Todd and Neil? Do you think Todd and Neil are 'friends?'"

"Charlie-"

"Neil would tell me, right? We're best friends, we don't keep secrets-"

"Charlie-"

"I guess they have gotten closer, but I didn't think-"

"Charlie!" Meeks raising his voice breaks the spiral Charlie was heading down.

"Sorry! Sorry. Go on." Charlie gives a half smile, and Meeks can't stay mad at him for too long, a huge smile gracing his lips.

He continues, "She brought her 'friend' to Thanksgiving a few years ago. Maybe they laughed a bit too hard together, or maybe my sisters asked too many questions, but all of a sudden my father had her in the study. There was a lot of yelling, and when she came out she was crying. They left and I haven't seen her since. My dad won't talk about her."

For once Charlie doesn't speak, processing everything Meeks is saying.

Meeks continues, "I learned then what the world thinks about people like us. I learned that if I indulged in this, I'd lose my family." Charlie notices tear brimming Meeks' eyes, and reaches up to wipe them away. "I love my family. I can't imagine never talking to my mother or sisters again."

Charlie knows what he means. The idea of his father finding out has

always been terrifying, but more because his father would likely kill him. But if he didn't, if he instead excised Charlie from the family, would he ever be allowed to talk to Mel again?

"I'm sorry, Meeksie."

"It's okay," Meeks isn't crying yet, but his voice sounds raw. "There's sneaking around, right? We're doing pretty good at that."

Charlie presses a kiss into Meeks' hair. "Yeah. But for the rest of our lives?"

Meeks shrugs, "I've made my peace with it."

Charlie feels worse than before. He leans forward, hoping kissing Meeks will make him feel better.

"Charlie?" A voice calls out, stopping him inches from closing the gap. Meeks jumps back like a spooked rabbit.

He lets his eyes adjust to the darkness to see the figure walking towards them. "Knoxious?" He calls back.

Knox is by himself, no Chris in sight. "I'll leave you to it." Meeks says, getting up to join the others.

"Meeks, wait-" Charlie reaches out, but Meeks is already gone.

Knox reaches him, and his eyes follow Meeks scurrying away. "You two hanging out?" Knox asks, so casually.

"Yeah, just talking." He doesn't get up from his spot in the snow, so Knox takes the spot Meeks abandoned. "Where's Chris?"

Knox runs a hand through his hair, "Yeah, about that." He sighs, "She doesn't think we're a good match."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Charlie consoles.

Knox doesn't seem that broken up about it. "It's okay. Really. Like I told you before, I've been chasing her to not think about you."

"Yeah." Charlie is being dismissive. He can't handle this right now, not when he's worried about Neil. "How did she like the play?"

"She loved it. Turns out her best friend was in it, Chet's sister. Ginny, I think?" Knox rambles.

“Yeah, Neil talked about her. She sounds nice.” Knox is looking at him, making Charlie’s skin crawl with anxiety.

“Listen, Charlie-“ Knox starts.

“Can we not do this tonight, Knox?” Charlie pleads. “I’m worried about Neil. I can’t think straight right now.”

“Oh.” Knox sounds disappointed.

“I’m sorry.” Charlie says. He swipes a thumb over the back of Knox’s hand. “I do want to talk about this, okay?”

“It’s just,” Knox continues, because he’s never known when to stop, “my father is terrifying, you know?”

“I know.” Charlie has seen Mr. Overstreet, he’s almost as bad as Charlie’s dad. “Look, I had a talk with Meeks. And I understand a little better now, I think. Maybe. I don’t know. I’m still a bit confused.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But we’ll talk in the morning, okay? After I’m sure Neil is okay. For now, up for some poetry?” Knox smiles at him. They bump shoulders, the little contact giving Charlie a burst of hope.

Maybe not hope for them, but hope for a good future. Hope that Neil is okay, and hope that tonight’s meeting will at least keep him distracted until the morning.

Knox and him walk the path that leads to cave together. And if their hands happen to collide, to lace together, if Charlie happens to lean into Knox, who’s around to prove it?

Chapter End Notes

> Some hope and happiness before the heaviness that comes after the play. If you liked to, please leave a comment, I love reading everyone’s thoughts!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlie is up before the sun, which is shocking in itself. He's also up before Cameron, which is unheard of. He's out of the door before he can change, he has to get to the phone.

He thanks all those summers that his dad wouldn't let him go to the Perry's, as it's burned the number into his brain. Charlie dials as fast as he can, and each unanswered ring racks his body with new nerves.

Finally, an answer. "Hello?" Mr. Perry.

Charlie clears his throat. "Hello, Mr. Perry! This is Charlie Dalton. I was hoping to speak to Neil?"

And then it's silent. For much longer than it would take to hand the phone off, it's silent. "Oh, Charlie. We were going to call the school this afternoon and tell them." Mr. Perry sounds like he's crying. Why is he crying? Tell the school what?

And then it's there, in the air.

Neil's dead. No, Neil killed himself. Echoes of "my gun" and "my study" and "my son" come through the phone. Charlie is frozen in place.

He hangs up, like maybe that will change the reality. He sprints to the bathroom, vomit clawing up his throat. He makes it just in time to get sick in one of the stalls.

Charlie is open mouth sobbing, screams he didn't know he had in him being ripped from his throat. He shakily stumbles to the sink and starts splashing cold water on his face, a trick he learned growing up. Cold shocks your system, it should be a reset.

He doesn't hear the footsteps, and almost hits the two boys grabbing him on reflex. Through tears he makes out the figures of Meeks and Knox, with Pitts standing in the doorway.

He feels that switch in his brain flick, the need to perform, for everyone to know everything is okay. "I'm okay." He says out loud.

“What are you doing here?” Every word comes out shaky, his throat raw from screaming. He’s still crying, still vibrating, but he’s smiling now to convince his friends everything is okay.

It doesn’t work, obviously. “Charlie, calm down. What’s going on?” Meeks is grabbing his face and forcing him make eye contact.

“Oh god, Meeksie.” Oh god, indeed. How is he going to tell them? How can he ruin their lives like this? How could Neil leave?

Charlie knows if he doesn’t tell them, they’ll find out in an assembly. That’s not fair. So he starts, “N-Neil…” he gets one word in before he’s rag-dolling to the floor, taking Meeks and Knox with him. Knox catches his head before it hits the pristine tile.

“What about Neil?” Meeks continues to try and soothe it out of Charlie. “Is he okay?”

Charlie is shaking his head furiously, his heart feels like it might explode.

“Charlie.” Knox is talking now, using the voice one would use to calm a frightened animal.

“He’s dead!” It echoes off the bathroom walls, it’s a primal scream that Charlie swears could shatter ear drums. His yawp.

Knox and Meeks loosen their grip on Charlie but he doesn’t move. It’s his fault. If Keating had let him talk to Mr. Perry, Neil would be there. He’d be okay. If Charlie would have defied the Captain, everything would be okay.

But he didn’t. He didn’t, and now Neil is dead. And he’s the one that has to tell his friends.

“Dead?” Knox echoes. Charlie looks up and sees Meeks and Pitts in shock, their faces empty.

Charlie wishes he could float away. He curses his brain that this is the one time it decides to stay grounded, to make him feel every inch of this grief. He realizes in this moment something awful.

“We have to tell Todd.” He hiccups out.

“That will break him.” Knox says.

“I know.” Charlie agrees, “But it will be worse if he finds out through

Nolan." He sees Meeks slightly nod.

"We should all go. Together. To tell him, that is." Meek posits, eyes a million miles away. "What if he does something stupid, you know?"

Like following Neil. It goes unsaid.

"What even happened?" Pitts is finally able to speak.

So Charlie tells them. And somewhere in the telling he manages to calm down enough to feel okay talking to Todd. Or rather, he's able to shift his brain into that mode, the one he used to use for telling his little sister bad news, that protector persona.

They all agree they need to stick by Todd, just in case. So when Charlie tells him, and Todd seems to have no reaction outside of "Can we go outside?" They follow him.

Charlie isn't mad that everyone is comforting Neil's roommate- no, more, according to Meeks- over him. He's used to this role. He just hopes he can do right by Neil in protecting Todd.

He shoves snow in Todd's screaming mouth. Cold, a reset.

Nolan is told and Neil's bed is stripped. Charlie stood outside of the door while they did it, doing everything in his power to keep from ripping the bedsheets out of faculties hands for one more piece of Neil.

The boys decide to smoke in the attic, a make-shift cave. Charlie stares out of the window while everyone makes idle conversation. He plays with his cigarette and wonders how the world is still turning without Neil.

He doesn't regret punching Cameron. Even after he sees the look on Meeks and Knox's faces, them pleading with him to behave so that he may stay here at Welton. Even after seeing the blood dripping out of Cameron's nose. Even after knowing this is it, there's no going back now.

It's the release he needs, and if the two boys he's been bounced between for two years weren't holding him back, he may have finished the job.

It's tempting, the idea of smashing Cameron's face in. He's tainted Neil's legacy.

This is the beginning of the end.

Chapter End Notes

> I have had this chapter in my head for so long I just had to write it down, so enjoy two updates in one day! Tell me your thoughts, and as always, thank you for reading!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Something short and sweet!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's the beginning of the end. The other poets ushered Cameron out of the attic, probably to keep him from antagonizing Charlie anymore. And here they sit, Charlie and Knox, surrounded by suitcases. Knox can't help but notice that some of Cameron's blood is decorating Charlie's knuckles.

It's strange, grieving someone you can physically touch. But he is. The moment Charlie's fist collided with Cameron's face, Knox felt an overwhelming sense of grief. Charlie was going to be expelled. And that would be it.

The idea of Mr. Dalton letting Charlie talk to any of his Welton friends after he leaves is a laugh. He'll be lucky if Charlie isn't locked away in a tower like a damsel in distress, waiting for rescue.

Charlie's body language is not friendly. He's hunched into himself, looking out the window and gripping his cigarette so hard Knox is unsure how it doesn't break in half. He reaches out lightly, like if he's not careful Charlie will shatter.

Charlie looks at him when he feels the contact, eyes swirling with anger. "I don't want to talk about it."

Knox keeps a calm voice, even if he's panicking. "You promised me we'd talk." He keeps his hand on Charlie's thigh, getting in every ounce of touch he can before he disappears.

Charlie chokes on his smoke with a bitter laugh. "About us, Knoxie. That doesn't really seem to matter anymore." And it's true, with Charlie leaving there isn't really a 'them' to speak about.

But it still stings.

"I'm still owed a conversation." Knox argues.

"And this is what you want to waste it on?" Charlie's face is so close now. He releases smoke that engulfs Knox. It's so similar to that night

on the roof. The smoke smells nostalgic. “Telling me something I already know?”

“You’re going to get kicked out.”

“I already know that.” He looks out the window again and Knox wants to grab his face, keep him looking this way, keep those eyes on him as long as possible.

So he does, gently guiding Charlie back to him. The other boy doesn’t seem to mind, slightly leaning into the touch. “Why’d you do it?”

Charlie shrugs, eyes looking down. “The way he was talking. He was disrespecting Mr. Keating. He was upsetting Todd. He was acting like he knew anything about Neil.” Eye contact once more, “I just couldn’t take it, Knox. It was either punch him or jump out of the window, you know?”

“I guess.” He didn’t, nobody could begin to understand the mind of Charlie Dalton. The only person that ever came close was dead now. “What are we supposed to do without you?”

“Carpe diem.” Charlie smirks. “Continue to seize the day.” As if Knox was any good at that.

“I don’t want you to go. Can’t your father give some big donation so you can stay?”

Charlie shakes his head. “I doubt it. He’s definitely going to say this is my fault and be excited to move me to a new school. Somewhere I’m not a bad influence on you guys.” His fault? He couldn’t possibly mean that he thought Neil was his fault. Did he?

“You’re not a bad influence.” Knox insists, though he is suddenly aware he hasn’t dropped his hand from Charlie’s face. Good or bad, that’s because of Charlie, and Knox knows their fathers wouldn’t see this touch as anything resembling good.

Charlie presses their foreheads together, and Knox feels chills up his spine at the touch.

“Can’t we just stay here?” Knox whispers, “Hide and no one will find us and you never have to leave.”

Charlie chuckles and presses a kiss to Knox’s nose. “Become fugitives?” He poses.

“Yeah, and die in a shootout holding hands. Our skeletons will be tangled together when they find us.”

“Very poetic, Mr. Overstreet.” Charlie jokes, somehow finding the energy for humor even now. “But alas,” he pulls away and Knox almost whines at the loss, “my time here is done. Walk to the gallows with me?” He hold his hand out.

The two stand up together, hand in hand. “So dramatic, Dalton. You’ll get one more night. They’ll probably pack you up in the morning.”

“Does that mean my last meal is Hellton hash? Oh the agony!” Charlie holds a hand to his forehead in mock distress.

The pair laugh, holding hands all the way to the hallway. When holding hands is no longer safe, Knox still stays close enough that their shoulders are brushing, not losing contact until they reach Charlie’s dorm.

“I’m gonna lay down, okay? Make sure Cameron doesn’t come in.” Charlie instructs.

Knox nods, “I think the others are distracting him. Or he’s talking to Nolan. Either way, he’s staying far away from you.”

“Good. I might actually kill him.” He shakes in head and opens the door. “See you at dinner?”

“Yeah.” And Charlie disappears. There it is again, the grief.

Charlie doesn’t come to dinner. Surprising, considering the big scene he could have made. So Knox brings a plate to his dorm halfway through the meal.

He knocks on the door, to no response. He opens it slightly and sees Charlie asleep. He sits on the bed, balancing his plate in one hand and using the other to shake Charlie awake.

“Hm?” Charlie makes a small noise and wipes the sleep out of his eyes. “Knox? What’s up?” He sits up.

“You missed dinner.” Knox hands Charlie the plate.

Charlie yawns and nods, “Yeah, wasn’t exactly feeling hungry. The whole impending doom thing has really got me down, you know?”

“You’re not skipping out on your last meal with me, Dalton. Eat.” He

shoves a rolls at Charlie's mouth, and Charlie takes a bite while rolling his eyes.

"You know," Charlie says around bread, "I haven't eaten all day. For once, hash doesn't sound so bad." He digs in, and Knox watches the whole time, drinking in the sight of Charlie here in front of him.

Halfway through the plate, Charlie takes a breath. "Thank you, Knoxie. I'm gonna miss this." A beat of silence before, "I'm gonna miss you."

"You're not dying, Charlie." But tears are creeping into Knox's eyes.

"God, feels like it though." Charlie admits.

Knox goes to grab the half eaten plate. Charlie happily hands it over and Knox places it on Cameron's bed. "Well," Knox leans close, "any last wish?"

"A kiss, for a dying man?" It's no sooner that the words leave Charlie's lips that Knox is on them.

It's sweet, not the usual intensity to pair has. Knox is slow in his movements, taking the time to memorize every curve, every inch of Charlie's skin.

Charlie is first to pull away, smiling so big Knox is sure his face must hurt. "You sure know how to send a guy off."

Knox chuckles, leaning in again. Charlie holds a finger to his lips to stop him. Knox lets his disappointment paint his face. "I told you, I haven't eaten all day. Let me finish my hash, and then we can finish this."

Charlie does finish his hash, and they finish each other. They lay there in Charlie's bed, long past dinner is done. Knox hears the other boys start to make their way to get ready for bed in the hallway.

Charlie remembers something and bolts up. "Cameron. If he sees us, I won't be the only one getting kicked out."

Knox lets a mischievous smile fill his face. "Oh, did I forget to tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Charlie is throwing his sleep shirt on and tosses Knox's pants at him. "Knoxious, please put your clothes on."

“Cameron is staying in another dorm tonight. All by himself. They’re scared we’re gonna kill him.” Knox informs. He does pull his pants on, but leaves his chest bare.

Charlie nods, letting out a heavy breath he must have been holding. “Fair enough. Verdicts still out on that one.” He makes his way back to the small bed, squeezing in with Knox.

It’s perfect for Knox, a proper send off. He waits until he knows everyone is asleep to sneak back to his room. He doesn’t say goodbye to Charlie, because that would make it too real. No, he’ll say goodbye tomorrow.

Tomorrow comes. He doesn’t get a chance. The boys are all told to dress in their uniforms, and by the time he’s done, Nolan is calling for Meeks. Charlie is already gone.

Chapter End Notes

> I have a fun surprise for the next chapter!! I hope you enjoy, and as always, comments are always appreciated!! Thank you all so much for reading!

Meeks' Interlude

Chapter Notes

> Surprise! Meeks chapter! Just like the last interlude, it's very short but I had to write for Meeks at least once before I end this fic. Also we've reached 20 chapters! What an accomplishment!! Thank you all for all of your support!

The walk to Nolan's office feels like the path to death row. Meeks drags his feet, especially once he sees his parents waiting outside of the door for him.

He sees Charlie being escorted out, bags in hand. He tries to reach out to get one more touch, even calls Charlie's name, but Mr. Dalton surrounds his son like a body guard.

Meeks doesn't get to say goodbye. He signs Keating's warrant with his parents breathing down his neck. Of course he doesn't want to, none of them do, but it's what is expected of them.

His parents try to talk to him after, telling him he did the right thing. Meeks just tells them he has homework and rushes back to his room without so much as an 'I love you.'

He won't let them see him cry, won't give them the satisfaction.

Tears burn his eyes as soon as he closes the door. Pitts looks at him with concern, but Meeks just waves him off.

He waits to let the emotions consume him until Pitts is called. That family is close, he'll be gone awhile. They'll probably take him to lunch for his good work.

He sits at his desk and open mouth sobs. Neil's gone. Charlie's gone. Mr. Keating isn't far behind.

Todd knocks on the door, Meeks sends him away.

He decides doing homework might actually help him, give him something to do. He opens his desk drawer and rifles around for a working pen, when something shiny catches his eye.

Fishing it out, Meeks is face to face with a lipstick tube. The same one Charlie stole from those college girls.

Meeks must look like a maniac, crying and laughing so loud there's no doubt everyone in the hall hears him.

He opens the tube and draws a bright red x on the back of his hand.

Long live Nuwanda.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> I'm writing on a new platform, so bare with me if there are any formatting or editing issues! I'm learning! Knox and Meeks chapter, I thought they deserved to talk

Knox needs to talk to someone. He's not sure who, but if he sits in his dorm any longer he just might explode. The anger of having to sign that wretched document combined with the pain that comes from losing Neil and Charlie is too much.

He weighs his options. Pitts would be a sympathetic ear, but he's out with his family and probably wont be back until the weekend is up. Seeing Todd, standing in Neil's old dorm, would no doubt send him over the edge right now. And as for Cameron, if Knox saw him right now he would be following Charlie's path out the door.

That leaves Meeks, which honestly should have been his first option. After all, who else could understand their heart being taken with Charlie as he was ushered away? Knox strides to Meeks' door and knocks.

"I said go away, Todd." Meeks' voice rings through, annoyance mixed with the telltale sniff of a crying man. No surprise, there is not likely a dry eye among the poets.

"It's me, Meeks." Knox responds.

He hears movement in the room before the door opens, revealing a flushed Steven Meeks. "Knox?"

"Hey." It's strange, Knox realizes in this moment that him and Meeks haven't been alone in a long time. He wonders passively if that was Charlie's fault or his own.

"You, uh, want to come in?" Meeks is picking at the peeling paint on his doorway, avoiding eye contact.

Knox nods and crosses the threshold quickly, as if to keep Meeks from changing his mind. He doesn't sit, too tense to even pretend at relaxing. Meeks closes the door, and takes a seat at his desk. He picks up a pencil and taps it absentmindedly against his knee.

“So,” Knox starts, not really sure what he wants to say.

“So.” Meeks responds, eyes wandering. He very clearly doesn’t want Knox here, but he still let him in. Why?

“Are you gonna call him?” Knox posits.

This earns a smirk from Meeks, which slowly turns into a smile, and then a small chuckle. “Yeah, I’m giving it a few weeks. No way his father isn’t putting him on lockdown the moment he gets home. I’m scared if I call…” Meeks trails off, but Knox knows what he means. Charlie has never disclosed what happens behind closed doors, but they had both in the unique position to see the scars. Meeks clears his throat. “You should call him. Once it’s safe, that is. He loves you, you know.”

Meeks gets quiet at that last part. He looks smaller thank usual, pale and frail. Like every ounce of fight had been sapped from him. “He loves you too.” Knox tries to comfort.

Meeks lets out a slight, breathy laugh. “No, he ‘loves’ you. He ‘fucks’ me.” So vulgar. Knox had never heard Meeks speak in this way. He wonders passively if this is a side of the boy that Charlie got to see.

“He kept going back to you. That’s gotta mean something.” Knox reasons.

Meeks ponders this, flipping his pencil idly in his fingers. “You know,” he settles on finally, “I never hated you.”

Knox tilts his head, confused by this admission. “I would hope not.” After all, despite it all, they were always friends.

“You got everything I’ve always wanted without trying. I got your scraps when you didn’t want it. I should hate you.” Meek expands. “Instead, it’s more of a…” He looks for the word.

“Kinship?” Knox offers.

“Kinship.” Meeks agrees. It’s the perfect word, a bond forged solely on shared experience.

“What was he like? With you, I mean.” It’s an awkward question, and makes Meeks shift in his seat.

“What do you mean?” Meeks is looking anywhere but at Knox.

“When you two were, you know,” It was inappropriate, sure, but what else were two teenage boys looking for a distraction to talk about?

“Um,” Meeks clears his throat, “gentle, if I wanted.”

“Did you want?”

“Not often,” He lets out a half laugh that makes his curls bounce. “You?”

“We were,” Knox searches for the word, “intense.” Meeks doesn’t comment on that. He doesn’t have to, Knox knows what he’s thinking. That ‘intense’ was the worst word Knox could use, because anything regarding Charlie Dalton was intense. So Knox goes on, “If I could do it all again-“

“You would do the exact same thing.” Meeks interrupts.

“Yeah.” He admits. “Because I’m scared. I know.”

Meeks nods. “Me too. One time Charlie asked me what happens after Welton, and I couldn’t even entertain the idea of living a life where I don’t marry some woman my father chooses. I still can’t”

“What do you think will happen to him?”

“I think he’ll fight it to the end, but it always ends the same way for boys like us.” Meeks doesn’t even sound sad, or mad, or anything other than resigned. Resigned to a miserable life with a miserable wife.

Knox can imagine himself like that, married to a woman. He can imagine Meeks like that, spending his life playing it safe. But Charlie? Charlie, who never followed the rules, who wore his defiance like armor. Knox couldn’t imagine him settling down, taking a bride, and playing family.

What then? Was Charlie going to disappear into the night to a big city where hiding was was easier? Become nothing more than a passing idea that Knox had once known?

He can tell Meeks is going on a similar ride in his mind, the way his mouth is slightly agape and his eyes are distant. Knox clears his throat and Meeks snaps back to attention. “Sorry, spaced out.”

“It’s okay.” Knox doesn’t want to talk anymore, but if he goes back to

his room, he'll go mad. "Is it okay if I stay for a while?' He's sheepish about it, aware he has already gotten more than he deserves from Charlie's second choice.

"I have homework." Meeks answers.

"I can be quiet." Knox bargains.

Meeks sighs. "Use Pitts' bed."

Knox nods, moving to his approved bed. And he keeps his promise. He stays quiet, listening to the scratching of pencil on paper and flipping of pages.

It's what he needs, time with his friends. Comfortable silence with someone who thinks the way he does.

He ponders what Meeks said, about waiting to call Charlie. He marks the date in his mental calender, then counts out three weeks. That's when he'll call. He will call in the middle of the week, in the middle of the day, when Mr. Dalton would surely be out on business. It would be Christmas Break by then, and with the Perry's no longer an option, Charlie would certainly be home. He gets giddy at the thought of hearing Charlie's voice again.

Finally, something to look forward to.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One week.

It's one week after Charlie has been expelled, and Welton is acting like nothing has changed. Classes still drone on, teachers still assign mountains of homework, the boys are still forced to pray to the same God that took away Neil Perry every Sunday.

Mr. Overstreet had heard about Charlie's expulsion. He had called a few days after to tell Knox it was for the best. He had also informed Knox that Mr. Dalton had found a military school to send Charlie to on Mr. Perry's suggestion, and he would be sent away after winter break.

So now Knox had a time crunch to talk to Charlie. One more year of school to go, he can imagine Mr. Dalton won't have Charlie home until he's graduated. Or until this new school had broken him.

Knox chooses to hope Charlie will break the school before they can break him. Chooses to not think about the fact that Charlie is going to be run into the ground. That if and when he returns, he may not be the same.

The poets haven't had a meeting since the night of the play. It's too painful to go back there. The nights of joy and laughter and freedom already seem like a distant memory. They all handle Todd with kid gloves.

The school did not move Todd's room. He has to lay there every night, alone, the empty bed of Neil Perry haunting him. Knox couldn't imagine. Rumor has it, they are going to fill Neil's bed at the start of next semester.

They had excised Cameron from the group. It felt a bit mean to Knox, after all, Cameron cared about Neil too. But at the end of the day, Charlie and Mr. Keating would still be there if it wasn't for Cameron running his mouth. He had signed their death warrants.

Meeks and Knox have been getting closer, though. Their mutual misery acts as a glue, keeping them from drowning alone. Most of

their alone time is spent talking about Charlie, of course. And they dance around the topic of Neil. It's hard. After all, neither of them had ever known a Charlie without Neil.

Two weeks.

It's been two weeks since the worst day of Knox's life, and the poets are eating dinner. Meeks and Pitts are rambling about how unfair it is that that so close to break and they still have a ridiculous amount of chemistry homework to finish. Knox interjects every once in a while with a reminder that at least they are getting a break.

Something happens, something magical. Todd speaks. "We should have a meeting." He says. With how little he has spoken over these past couple weeks, Knox is surprised that his voice doesn't come out raw.

"Todd," Knox responds, "I don't know if that's a good idea. Just the four of us? Won't it feel…"

"Empty?" Meeks finishes Knox's sentence.

"Precisely." Knox nods.

"I know." Todd continues, "But Neil would want us to. Don't you think so?

The other poets all nod solemnly at each other. Neil would want them to continue. Neil would want them to find happiness, to do anything to keep from drowning in the sorrow he left them in.

"Okay," Knox throws his hands up in defeat. "You're right. Tonight?"

"Tonight." Todd agrees.

They sneak out that night the same they always had. It isn't until they are half way into the woods that Knox thinks about the consequences if they get caught. But he pushes the thought away, aware of the fact that nothing the school can do to them could be worse than the Hell they are already living in.

Todd reads a poem he's written, one that brings tears to the other's eyes. He doesn't have to say it, they know it's about Neil.

Three weeks.

Finally, it's been three weeks since Charlie waved goodbye. Knox is

home, having faked a stomach bug to get out of shopping with his parents and siblings, so he is all alone. Just like he planned.

His hands shake in excitement as he dials the number to the Dalton household. On the third ring, he considers hanging up. On the fifth ring, he worries Mr. Dalton might answer. On the seventh ring, someone finally picks up.

“Hello?” A woman.

“Mrs. Dalton?” This is bad. Mrs. Dalton would get Mr. Dalton and then Charlie would get in trouble and it would be all his fault.

Before he can hang up, the voice continues. “This is her daughter. Who am I speaking with?” Mel. Perfect.

“I was actually hoping to speak to your brother.” Knox admits.

“Another one of his Welton friends? Look, if my father knew you were calling-“

“I know. Is your father home?” Another one? Who was dumb enough to call before now?

“No,” she admits, “but I don’t know when he’ll be home, so-“

“I only need a moment.” Knox’s father would have slapped him if he knew how rude his son was being, cutting a lady off. But he needed this like air. He was suffocating without Charlie, and he just needed a few minutes to hear his voice.

Mel sighs on the other side. “Fine.” She calls for her brother. Knox hears mumbles of a conversation, only really able to pick out “friend,” “call,” and “I don’t know.”

Then, after weeks of waiting, his reward. “Um, hello?” It was like the gates of heaven opened in his chest, Knox could feel the light pouring out of him.

“Charlie!”

A pause. Oh no. Had Charlie forgotten his voice already? “… Knoxious?” Good, he did remember. “Why are you calling here?”

“I just needed to talk to you. I…” He is trying not to let the euphoria make him cry. He clears his throat. “I miss you.”

A little laugh floats through the phone. “You guys. You’re gonna get me killed, you know that?” There’s something different about Charlie’s voice, more dull now.

“You guys?” Knox asks. “Your sister mentioned someone else called.”

“Meeks.” Charlie fills in the gap. “Three days into me being home. My father answered.”

Meeks, of course. He couldn’t follow his own advice. Knox wishes he could be surprised, but Meeks has always followed Charlie wherever he may go. He was probably looking for direction now that Charlie was gone. “How did that go?”

“My father smashed my head into the coffee table.” Blunt. This wasn’t the Charlie Knox had grown up with. This Charlie was grieving and beaten and tired. And he was going to shipped away in that state.

“Oh.” What else was Knox supposed to say to that.

“Yeah. What do you want, Knox?” Knox knows this trick, Charlie is hoping anger will scare him away. But Knox is persistent.

“I heard you’re getting sent away at the top of the semester. I had a feeling that if I didn’t call you now…”

“You’d never hear from me again?” Charlie sighs. “You’re right. I doubt I’ll even be allowed to send letters. And even if I did..”

“My father or Welton would intercept them.” Finishing each other’s sentences makes Knox feel as connected as he can be to Charlie right now. “Maybe we could meet up. Before you go.”

“I don’t think so, Knoxie. My father is very adamant that I am not to speak to anyone at Welton.” Charlie’s given up. What hope was there for the rest of them if Charlie is giving up?

“So this is it?” Knox can’t believe it, doesn’t want to believe it. He doesn’t know what he expected to happen. Even if Charlie did agree to meet up, it’s not like Knox would have magically gathered the courage to go through with something like that.

“Afraid so.” They both sit in the uncomfortable silence they have created for a moment. “Maybe after graduation, yeah?”

“That’s so far out.” Knox runs a hand through his hair.

“I know. Can you do something for me, Knoxie?”

“Anything.” Because he would, he really would do whatever Charlie asked of him.

“Take care of Todd. I’ve been crazy worried about him.” Knox is too ashamed to admit that he has been pretty much avoiding Todd, scared that getting close to Todd would plunge him into a deeper grief than the one he was already struggling against. “And say hi to Meeksie for me.”

“That’s two things.” Knox points out.

That earns a genuine laugh from Charlie, and Knox’s heart soars knowing it’s because of him. “My bad. Too much for you to handle?”

“Of course not.”

Knox wants to tell Charlie he loves him. But he can’t be sure Mel isn’t eavesdropping, so instead he says, “I’ll be waiting for a call from you after we graduate, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, slick.”

“I promise.” Then, before Knox can respond, “Fuck! My father just got home, I gotta go.”

“Charlie-“

“I’ll call you, Knoxie. I promise.” And then the connection is severed.

Knox doesn’t know how long he stands there, phone to his ear waiting for Charlie to come back. It’s as though if he puts the phone back on the receiver, that would be it. Charlie could forget his promise in a year. Knox could never hear from him again.

The sound of a key in the front door breaks him out of his trance. He slams the phone back down and runs to his room before his family can see him. He dives into bed and wraps his comforter around his like a cocoon.

His door opens for a moment, and he hears his sister’s voice mumbling something about how she wishes she could sleep in before closing the door again.

He stays in his room the rest of the day, not even venturing out to eat. And for the most part, his family leaves him alone. Save for an incident in which his little brother bursts into his room, running for his bed but being caught by their mother before he could pounce.

Knox spends the rest of his break the way he always does: being the perfect son. During the day he lets his father lock them in his office and quizzes him on laws while his siblings torment each other. He lets his father make jabs at people like him and Charlie, praises Knox for being so obedient.

During the night he writes letters he will never send. He hides them in one of his textbooks on his bookshelf and reads them over and over when he is missing Charlie.

Before he knows it, the semester is starting again and his parents are waving him off as he reenters Welton.

He keeps his promises. Meeks is thrilled to know that Charlie is alive. Knox doesn't mention that he knows Meeks had called the Dalton home.

He ensures that Todd doesn't rot away in that room. Meetings aren't as common as they once were, but every time Knox notices Todd pulling away or eating less, he insists on an impromptu gathering.

Knox writes more and more poems. He reads them at the meetings. They may or may not all be about Charlie.

Chapter End Notes

> The next chapter will be the last! This has been so fun to write and I appreciate you all more than you know!

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlie Dalton receives a call one evening when he is 29. He went to that awful school, then he went to college, and now he stands here in the very nice house he bought by selling out and joining his father's business. He lets the phone ring a few times, debating letting it ring itself out. In the end, he answers. Not like he has anything else to do with his evening.

"Hello?"

"Charlie, hey." Charlie would recognize that voice anywhere. It's the voice he still sometimes hears in his dreams, one from a different era in his life.

"Knox?" He can't believe it. "Is that you?"

"Yeah! Yeah, it's me." Knox is drunk. He may not be slurring his words, but he doesn't have to. Charlie knows the sound of a man hiding his intoxication. "How are you?"

"You're drunk, Knox."

Knox chuckles through the phone. "I'll admit, I've had a couple glasses. Liquid courage, as they say."

Courage? Charlie doesn't know why the word sends a shiver down his spine. "How did you get my number, Knox?"

"Meeks gave it to me." He admits.

Charlie scoffs, "Of course he did."

"Are you two still close then?" Knox asks.

"Sort of." Charlie tells him, "He calls me sometimes. For financial advice."

"Is that what you two are calling it these days?" There is venom in Knox's voice. Charlie wonders if Knox even realizes the jealousy dripping from his words.

“That’s all it is now.” Charlie can’t blame Knox for being suspicious. After all, it was no secret that back at Welton Charlie could barely do simple math without having Meeks double check his work. So he expands sheepishly, “Okay, you caught me. I call him to double check numbers for me sometimes. I’m still not great at it.”

He can practically hear Knox’s smirk through the phone. “Not great at it?”

“I know, I know. A banker who is terrible at math. Hilarious.” Charlie holds the phone between his shoulder and head while he busies his hands with pouring a glass of whiskey. If Knox gets to be intoxicated, why couldn’t he? “Luckily, I have other people to do a lot of the work for me. Like my own personal army of Meeks’s. Meeksi? Meeks?”

“Sounds like your wet dream.” Knox jokes.

“It could definitely be worse.”

“Did you know Meeks is married?” Knox changes the subject.

“Yeah.” Charlie takes a swig of the burning liquid. Of course he knew, he was there. That was the last time him and Meeks had ‘discussed financial advice,’ as Knox had so delicately put it. Meeks married one of his younger sisters best friends, a girl named Phoebe who had apparently always had a slight crush on him. When she confessed her love, Meeks saw an opportunity and seized it.

During the reception, while the new Mrs. Meeks excitedly talked with family and friends, her husband and Charlie locked themselves in the bathroom. While she was sharing cake with guests, Charlie marked every constellation he could find on Meeks before it was too late. While she wondered where her Steven was, Meeks was making marks so dangerously close to Charlie’s collar that other wedding goers would stare at after the affair was over.

“He tried to invite me,” Knox continues, “but I think I was on vacation. Or working late. Or a million other things.”

“Sounds like you’ve lived a busy life, Mr. Overstreet.” Charlie pulls out his desk chair and takes a seat, forcing himself to relax.

“Oh yeah,” Knox chuckles. “What about you? Is there a woman strong enough to have pinned down the elusive Charlie Dalton?

Charlie waves his hand as though Knox can see, “Heaven’s no! Many

have tried, all have failed."

"Is that so?"

"It is! Besides," Charlie's voice grows solemn, "you know you would have been invited."

"Really?"

"One of my first phone calls, Knoxie." It's nice, getting to be vulnerable like this.

"That's good, because, um," Knox stammers.

"Yeah?"

"I'm getting married." Charlie's stomach drops to his feet.

"Oh." It's the same feeling he had when Meeks had called him with the same news. This mixture of happiness and despair and jealousy towards a woman he had never met. A woman that would get to read the same maps he himself wrote back in high school.

"Yeah." Charlie is glad this is a phone call, he's sure his face reveals his true emotions. But still, it's almost like he can see Knox right next to him, telling him all this. What would Knox look like now? Still as gorgeous as the Welton days? Maybe he had more laugh lines now. Maybe he'd grown his hair out like Charlie. "I'm calling to invite you."

"What happened to a letter?" Charlie hopes this quip comes across as playful instead of the biting sarcasm it's intended to be.

"I wouldn't be able to hear your voice through a letter." Knox says it like it's so simple. "Will you come?"

"I, uh, I don't know."

"Come on, Char." Charlie feels time freeze at the simple nickname.

He's not mad at Knox, or at the woman that he'd be tied to by law. This is how it was always going to go. There was never going to be a world in which Charlie and Knox would be safe together. And eventually, Knox was going to have to settle down to meet expectations. Just as one day Charlie will have to settle down to meet expectations. He thought he had made peace with this fact.

But now it was laid bare in front of him, and Charlie couldn't wrap his

head around it. “Can I think on it?”

“Please,” Knox begs, “I don’t think I’ll survive without you there.”

“I don’t even know this woman’s name.” Charlie argues, as though he had know Phoebe’s before agreeing to be Meeks’ best man.

“Clarissa. Clarissa Windsor. She’s a lawyer, too. We met at some party my firm was having.” He must realize he’s rambling, because he then says, “It doesn’t matter. Will you come?”

“It’s the middle of the night.” Charlie is looking out his pitch black windows. He should say yes, but the idea of seeing Knox again just for him to be committing his life to someone else fills him with an unbearable amount of dread.

“I know.” Knox says.

“What’s she like?” Charlie’s good at that, stalling.

“Feisty.” Knox giggles. And then, quietly, “She actually reminds me a lot of you.”

It’s so quiet, Charlie almost isn’t sure he heard it right. Then when he is sure, he wonders if Knox meant to say it all. “Well, then. You have your work cut out for you.”

“Oh, yeah.” Knox takes a pause long enough to take a drink. Charlie knows this, because he uses the silence to take a shaky sip of his own. “So, are you coming?”

“Are you sure you want me there?” He isn’t sure why he’s asking. After all, Knox is the one that called him. But that seed that had been planted in him, the one that grew into a cacophony of doubt at the idea of anyone wanting him around. It was his father’s fault, not Knox’s, but it permeated every corner of his life.

“It won’t be the same without you.” Knox’s voice is so delicate.

Charlie sighs, defeated. “Of course I’ll be there.” Anything for Knox. “Send me the invitation. I’ll even throw you one hell of a party, if you want.”

“Thank you. Really.”

“Anytime, Knoxious.”

“I’ve missed you.” This makes Charlie smile. It’s not at though he doubted it, but it’s nice to hear after all this time.

“I missed you too, Knoxie.” Charlie finishes his whiskey in one painful swallow. It burns throughout his whole body. “It’s late.”

“Yeah…” Knox replies, clearly not wanting to hang up.

Charlie doesn’t want to either. “I should go.”

“Yeah,”

“I have work in the morning.” Charlie doesn’t move to hang up.

“Me too.”

“I’ll talk to you soon. Goodnight, Knox.”

“Goodnight, Charlie.”

Knox hangs up first.

Chapter End Notes

A bitter sweet ending, I know! I hope you all enjoyed! This fic has been a monster to write, but now I'm free to write even more! As always, I eat up comments and thank you all!

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